

NEW

VICTORY

IN THE

DESERT

HOW THE ALLIES WON THE BATTLE
FOR CONTROL OF NORTH
AFRICA AND CHANGED THE
COURSE OF WWII

★
SAS:
THE FORMIDABLE
FIGHTING FORCE THAT
WAS BORN IN AFRICA
★



From the makers of
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EDITION



DEFEATING THE AXIS
THE TACTICS THAT SECURED VICTORY



DEATH IN THE DUNES
HOW AFRICA BECAME A BLOODBATH



KEY COMMANDERS
THE MEN WHO SHAPED THE CONFLICT



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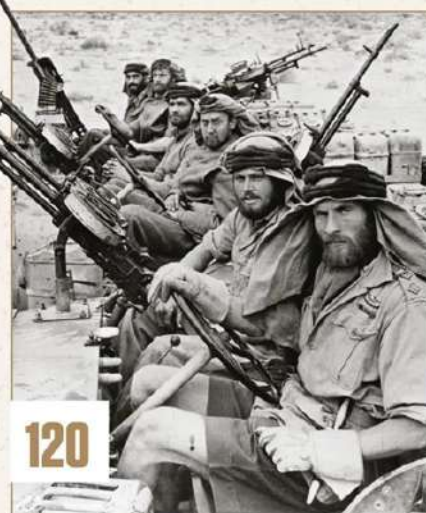
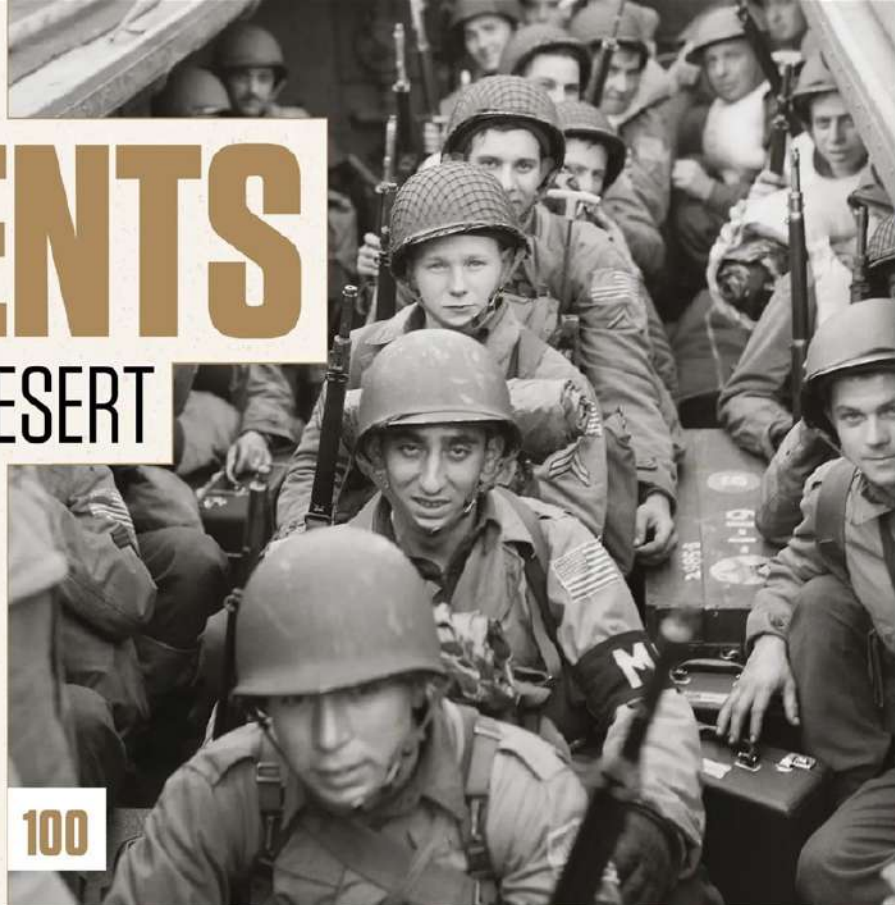
WELCOME

The conflict that raged across the arid landscape of North Africa from 10 June 1940 to 13 May 1943 was to prove costly to Allied and Axis forces alike. However, the achievements of the Western Desert Campaign, Operation Torch and the Tunisia Campaign were to prove pivotal to the outcome of World War II, as by outwitting Erwin Rommel, the famously wily Desert Fox, the Allies could push directly into the Mediterranean and bring about the downfall of Italy. This is the story of how British, American and Commonwealth troops were ultimately victorious in the desert...

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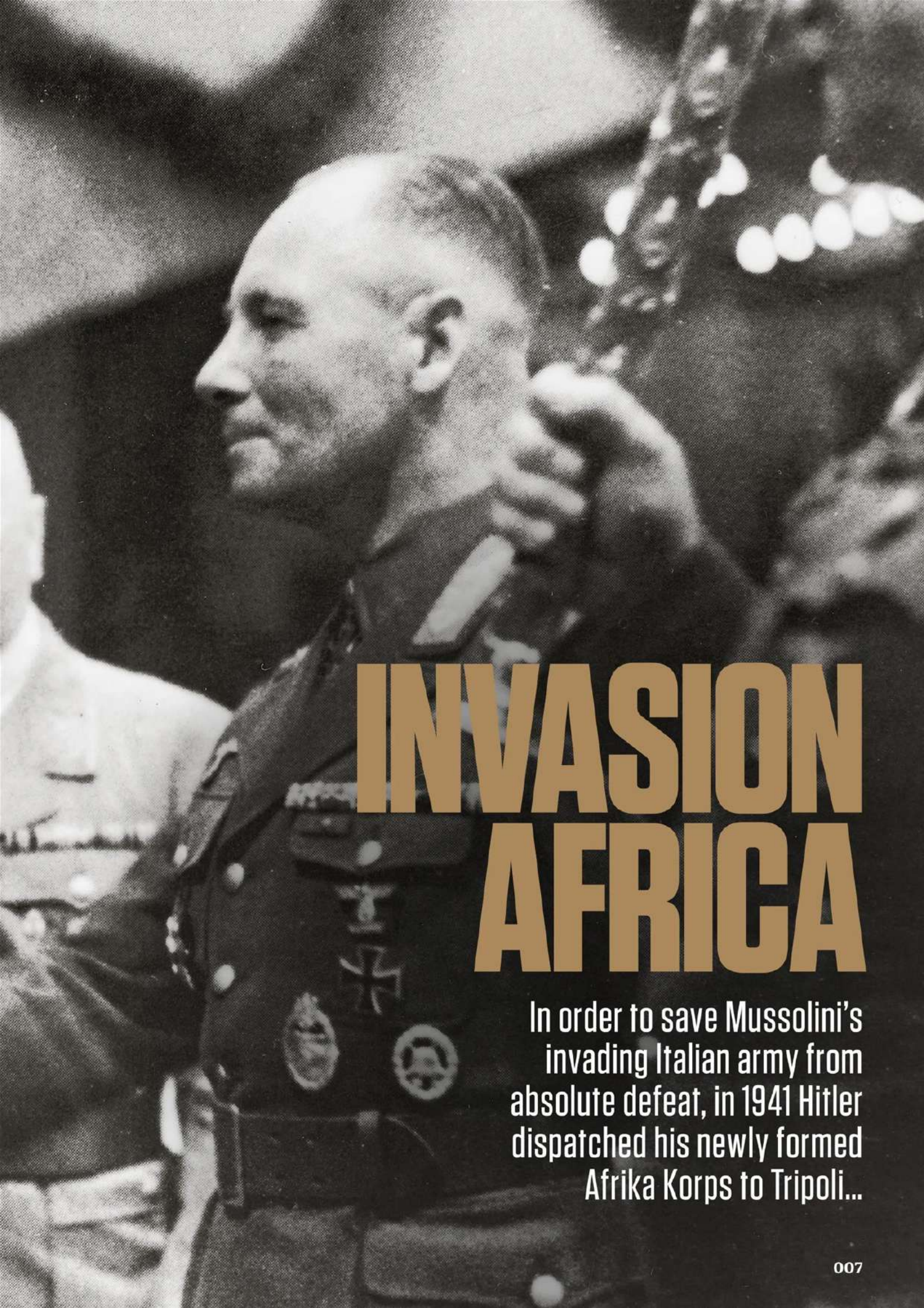


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INVASION AFRICA

In order to save Mussolini's
invading Italian army from
absolute defeat, in 1941 Hitler
dispatched his newly formed
Afrika Korps to Tripoli...





The British Commonwealth forces were joined by American troops for Operation Torch and the pursuit of Axis forces into Tunisia...



If victory could be secured in North Africa, then a route into the Mediterranean and the invasion of Italy could then be found...



THE CAMPAIGN BEGINS

Monty's victory at El Alamein was a pivotal event of World War II. Maybe not quite as pivotal as Churchill's famous aphorism would suggest; it wasn't quite true that "Before Alamein, we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat." Perhaps that's why this quote was prefixed by the oft-ignored qualifier, "It may almost be said".

But a turning point it certainly was. The second battle of El Alamein finally put Rommel's Afrika Korps to flight, though it was another six months before the desert campaign as a whole was concluded. The fighting in North Africa lasted almost three years in total, proving the longest land campaign fought by the British in the whole of World War II. It was also costly, with almost 35,500 British and Commonwealth troops confirmed killed, 20,000 Free French killed, wounded or missing, and over 2,700 Americans killed with around 15,500 wounded or missing.

Some historians have since argued that the North Africa campaign was a sideshow, an unnecessary diversion that was useful for propaganda, but did little to further the Allies' overall war aim and wasted resources that could have been better used in Europe. But most recognise the danger posed by Nazi Germany in North Africa. Had Rommel prevailed, overrunning British-held territories and advancing into Egypt and beyond, the Suez Canal would have fallen



Flying high: The Royal Canadian Air Force in Tunisia, April 1943, flying over the Tunisian desert providing cover for Allied bombers

North Africa was about to be plunged into almost three years of constant war, but how critical was the success of this new front?




*United strength: Axis
prisoners captured by
the Allies on the African
Front, Tunisia, May 1943*







A close look-out: General George S. Patton, Jr (1885–1945), in command of US II Corps, looks at positions with binoculars, North Africa, mid-1940s



into enemy hands, thereby denying the vital oilfields of the Middle East to the Allied war effort.

Even more dangerous was the prospect of a German breakthrough from the north, either through Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, or via Russia to the east of the Black Sea, sweeping westwards into Egypt. Had these forces linked up with Rommel's Afrika Korps moving eastwards from Libya, the Mediterranean would be dominated by Germany and Western access to Middle Eastern oil would be cut off. If Hitler had taken a more strategic outlook instead of becoming obsessed with destroying Russia, this may well have happened.

The importance of oil supplies is obvious. Petrol is the lifeblood of modern, mechanised armies, and Middle Eastern oil was crucial to the Allied war effort. But the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal were also of vital importance, providing a route through which supplies were brought from Britain's overseas dominions in Asia. As a result, defeat in North Africa could have proved catastrophic for the war in Europe.

AFRICAN ORIGINS

The origins of World War II's North Africa campaign go back as far as 1935, when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia from Italy's own overseas colony, Italian Somaliland. Egypt, feeling threatened by Italy's aggressive imperialism, granted permission for Britain to station a sizeable force there. Britain and France agreed to share responsibilities for protecting the Mediterranean, the former from its naval base in Alexandria, Egypt. Italy's main naval base was in Taranto, in the south of Italy, and she had air bases in Sicily and Sardinia. But what would she do in the event of a war?

At the outbreak of World War II, the Italian question remained unresolved. If she remained neutral, Allied shipping in the Mediterranean would go unmolested, but if she allied with Germany, the shipping lanes risked being closed down. After the German invasion of Poland and the declaration of war in September 1939, Italy took no action, but when Germany invaded France in May 1940, Mussolini, ever keen to take his place on the world's stage, declared war on both France and Britain.

A running joke in Nazi Germany lampooned Italy's expected influence on the war. Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel, the joke went, reported to Hitler: 'Mein Führer, Italy has entered the war.' 'Send two divisions,' Hitler replied. 'That

should be enough to finish them.' 'No, mein Führer,' said Keitel. 'Not against us, but with us.' 'That's different,' Hitler answered. 'Send in ten divisions.'

As early as 1936, when a lady asked Field Marshall Werner von Blomberg who would win the next war, he is said to have answered, "I cannot tell you that. Only one thing I can say. Whoever has Italy on his side is bound to lose."

But like it or not, on 10th June 1940, Mussolini took Italy into the war on Germany's side by declaring war on Britain and France, and appointed himself Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces in the Field. The Italian dictator was possessed by an almost obsessive urge to conquer and the dream of turning Italy into the world power he wished it to be, but this zeal was not shared by the Italian people. To Mussolini's frustration, the Italian army in North Africa was reluctant to leave its bases in Libya, and the people back home had little stomach for the conflict.

On the evening he declared war, Mussolini addressed the crowds in Rome. "Blackshirts of the revolution and of the Legions," he cried, "men and women of Italy and of the Empire, an hour marked by destiny is striking in the sky of our country. The hour of irrevocable decisions. We are entering the lists against the plutocratic and reactionary democracies of the West, who have always hindered the advance and often plotted against the existence of the Italian people. We will conquer. People of Italy, to arms. Show your courage, your tenacity and your worth."

ATMOSPHERE OF GLOOM

Naturally, the fascist faithful responded with cheers, but elsewhere in Rome, the news was greeted with less enthusiasm. According to historian Christopher Hibbert, "An atmosphere of gloom hung over the city." As Lieutenant Paolo Colacicchi of the Granatieri di Sardegna Mechanized Brigade put it, "We [Italy] were not ready to go to war in 1940. It was a political move by Mussolini, who felt Hitler was winning too much too quickly, and if he [Mussolini] didn't make

"When Germany invaded France in 1940, Mussolini, declared war on France and Britain"

some sort of gesture, he would not be able to sit at the conference table."

But go to war she did. Italy had two armies in Libya, with nine divisions of the 5th Army in Tripolitania facing the French in Tunisia, and five divisions of the 10th set against the British and Commonwealth forces in Egypt. Despite being told to take non-provocative defensive measures, on the 11th June, the British garrison in Egypt carried out a series of raids against Italian positions in Libya. It soon became clear the Italian forces were unprepared. According to Churchill, "Within twenty-four hours of the outbreak of the war the 11th Hussars crossed the frontier, took Italians – who had not heard war had been declared – by surprise, and captured prisoners." The 11th Hussars, whose regimental nickname was the Cherry Pickers, was part of the 7th Armoured Division – the Desert Rats. On 14 June, assisted by elements of the 1st Royal Tank Regiment and supported by Gloucester Gladiators of No. 33 Squadron and Blenheims of No. 211 Squadron, they captured Fort Capuzzo and Fort Maddalena near the Libyan/Egyptian border, taking 220 prisoners. Two days later, the 'C' Squadron of the 11th Hussars happened upon two Italian reinforcing columns heading to Fort Capuzzo. Between them, they contained 29 light tanks, 300 infantrymen and 30 supply lorries. After a brief skirmish in which a few Italian tanks were knocked out, the Italian force made a square formation, with an artillery piece in each corner, the infantry making up the sides and 12 of the remaining light tanks on each flank. The tanks charged forwards at the British mixed armour, but were destroyed without a single British casualty, and their commander, Colonel D'Avanzo, was killed. This encounter became known as the Battle of Girba, and was the first tank encounter of the desert war.

ILL-EQUIPPED

In another encounter on the very same day, other units from the 11th Hussars captured General

Romolo Lastucci, Engineer-in-Chief of the Italian 10th Army, along with his staff officer, two female companions and, most importantly, well-marked and up-to-date maps revealing the layout of the Bardia defences.

Despite being poorly equipped with obsolete Rolls Royce and Morris armoured cars, the Cherry Pickers were proving adept at small-scale desert skirmishes. As Churchill later wrote, "In this small but lively warfare our troops felt they had the advantage and soon conceived themselves to be masters of the desert. Until they came up against large formed bodies or fortified posts, they could go where they liked, collecting trophies from sharp encounters."

The Italians lost another important officer on 28 June when a plane carrying Italo Balbo, Marshal of the Air Force and Governor-General of Italian Libya, was shot down in a friendly fire incident while attempting to land at an airfield near Tobruk. Approaching a few minutes after an air raid, Italian anti-aircraft gunners mistook his aircraft as British.

But the French surrender on 25 June 1940 had changed the face of this nascent desert war. The 5th Army in Tripolitania was redeployed east to reinforce the 10th. Coupled with the increasingly fragile state of the British armoured equipment, this caused General Archibald Percival Wavell, Commander in Chief, Middle East Command, to cease the raiding parties and carry out only reconnaissance actions beyond the Allied lines.

Mussolini ordered the 10th Army to invade Egypt on 8 August. When this invasion failed to materialise, he sent an angry telegram to Marshal Rodolfo Graziani. Balbo's replacement as Commander-in-Chief of Italian North Africa and Governor General of Libya, ordering him to strike as soon as the Germans put Operation Sea Lion into effect. "The invasion of Great Britain has been decided," said the telegram. "Concerning the date, it could be within a week or a month, but the day on which the first German platoon touches British

Undercover: Officers of the 11th Hussars take shade while out patrolling on the Libyan frontier, 26 July 1940



"Our troops soon conceived themselves to be masters of the desert"

Winston Churchill



territory, you will attack. Once again, I repeat that there are no territorial objectives. It is not a question of aiming for Alexandria nor even Sollum. I am only asking that you attack the British forces facing you."

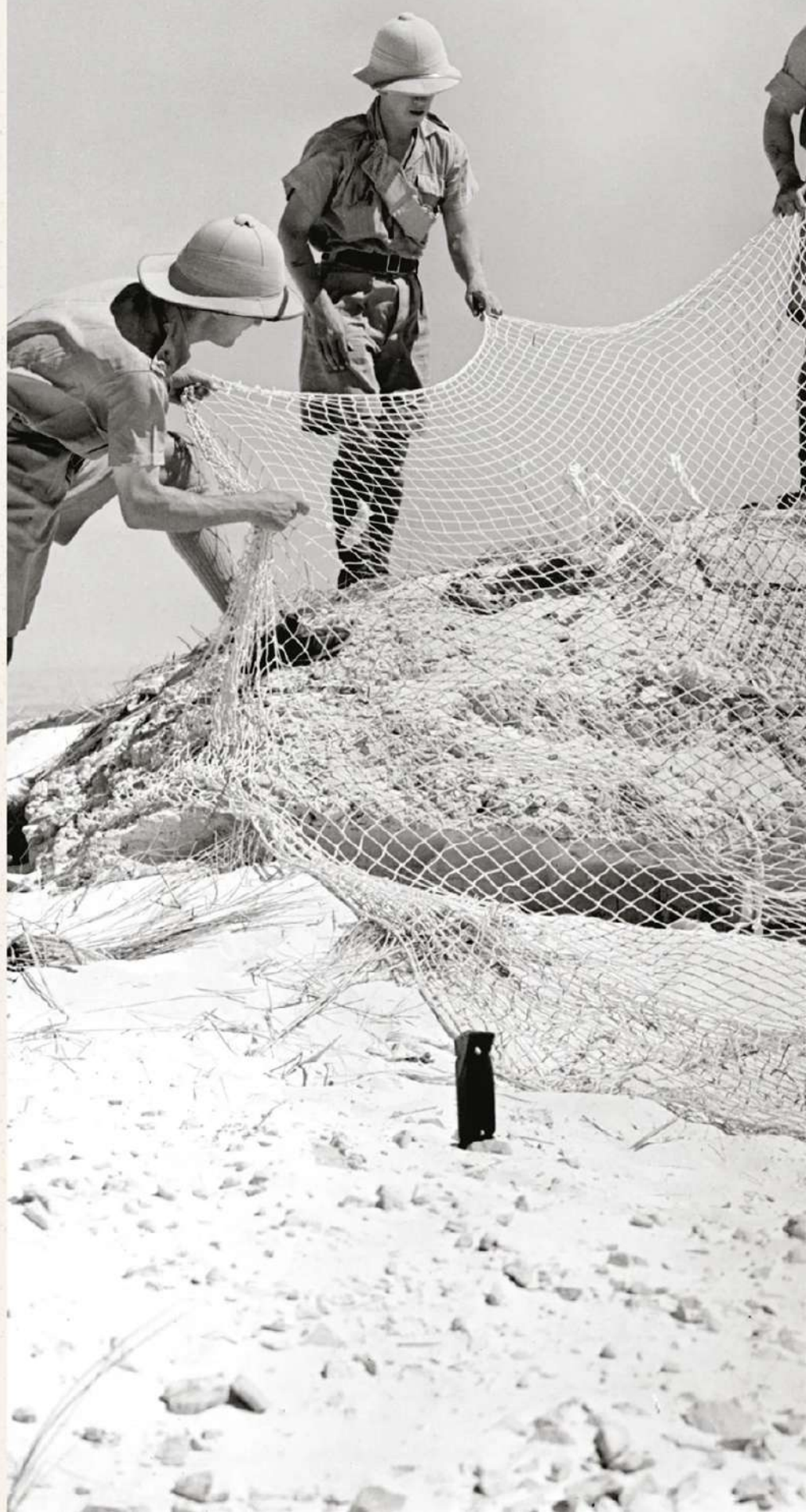
MOVING ON

Sea Lion failed to materialise, though the invasion of Egypt went ahead on 8 September. Five days later Fort Capuzzo was recaptured and the 10th Army crossed the border into Libya. Sollum, Halfaya Pass, and Sidi Barrani were captured almost without incident, but Marshal Graziani – who didn't think the invasion feasible and had to be threatened with dismissal before he would set it into motion – greatly overestimated the strength of the British forces further into Egypt. He also faced considerable logistical problems. He told Mussolini the advance to his next target, the coastal town of Mersa Matruh, would take six days as his largely unmotorised army would be travelling on foot. His requests for motorised transport had long gone unanswered, so he now asked for 600 mules, among other equipment. Reluctant to press forward as urged by Mussolini, on 16 September, he established a front just east of Sidi Barrani, just 60 miles inside Egypt. But it was around 80 miles short of the main British defensive position at Mersa Matruh, 300 miles from Cairo and nowhere near the invasion's original target of the Suez Canal.

Mussolini was furious. On 26 October, he telegraphed Graziani: "Forty days after the capture of Sidi Barrani I ask myself the question, to whom has this long halt been any use – to us or to the enemy? I do not hesitate to answer, it has been of much use, indeed, more to the enemy. It is time to ask whether you feel you wish to continue to command." But two days later, the Italian invasion of Greece diverted the dictator's attentions away from the North African campaign, and he was allowed to plan the next stage of the invasion at his own pace.

"Marshal Graziani's requests for transport had gone unanswered, so he now asked for 600 mules"

In the net: Men of the Highland Light Infantry (City of Glasgow Regiment) camouflaging a gun position at Mersa Matruh, 28 May 1940









Tough ascent: British infantry wearing gas masks advance during exercises at Mersa Matruh, Egypt

OPERATION COMPASS

The Allied counter-attack proved very costly for the Italian forces in North Africa, but there was to be no knockout blow...

Marshal Graziani set his sights on an advance to Mersa Matruh in December, but events were to overtake him. In late September, the Allied Western Desert forces were reinforced with three new Armoured Regiments. The 2nd Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) brought a selection of Cruiser tanks, the 7th RTR had 48 Matilda tanks, and the 3rd Hussars used light tanks. As the Italians had dug in and ceased to advance, the Allied Commander of the Western Desert Force, General Richard O'Connor, used this lull in the fighting to reorganise his units and plan his counterattack, codenamed Operation Compass, with his fellow commanders.

The Italian 10th Army had established a series of fortified camps across a 50-mile front around Sidi Barrani. These camps held an estimated 80,000 men, with about 120 tanks and 200 guns, but were spread out surprisingly far. For example, there was a 20-mile gap between Sofafi on the southern flank and its nearest neighbour at Nibeiwa. As O'Connor later said, "[The Italians had] a

series of these fortified perimeter camps, and we decided as they were so far apart, they would be unable to support each other. We moved our troops around to attack them from the rear, the way that their rations would come."

General O'Connor's plan was for the 7th Armoured Division to lead the 4th Indian Division and the 16th British Infantry Brigade through the gap and attack the camps at Nibeiwa and Tummar from the rear, surrounding the two camps at Sofafi and also a single camp at Maktilla. The 7th Armoured Division would then strike northwest toward Buqbuq while the Indian 4th Division would advance northeast toward Sidi Barrani, which would be bombarded by the Royal Navy. The operation, which was to last around five days, would thus pick off the camps one at a time.

Moving so many troops across 70 miles of open desert to tackle a force that was significantly larger was a tremendously risky affair. However, according to Churchill, "The prize was worthy of the hazard. The arrival of our vanguard on the sea at Buqbuq would cut the communications of Marshall Graziani's army. Attacked by

"We moved our troops around to attack them from the rear"

General O'Connor, Allied forces



Navigating a minefield – planning Operation Compass

General Sir Claude Auchinleck (left), Commander-in-Chief of the British armed forces in the Middle East during the war, examines a map beside General Sir Archibald Wavell, the driving force behind Operation Compass, a daring assault on Italian forces based in Egypt and eastern Libya that represented the first major British operation of the Western Desert Campaign.

While planning the operation alongside Lt Gen Richard O'Connor and Lt Gen Sir Henry Maitland 'Jumbo' Wilson, Wavell poured over aerial photos of heavily defended

Italian positions of Nibeiwa and the Tummars (West, East and Central).

Wavell's assistant, Brigadier Eric Dorman-Smith, concocted the audacious plan to rush through breaches in the minefields defending the camps, gaps created by the Italians for supply vehicles to use.

On 9 December 1940 the British executed their top-secret plan, initiating what would become a bloody two-month campaign that would result in the capture of approximately 138,000 enemy troops and countless tanks, guns and aircraft at a cost of 1,900 casualties.



surprise from the rear they might well be forced ... into mass surrenders. In this case, the Italian front would be irretrievably broken."

After two days' training on fortified replicas of the Italian camps, on 7 December 1940, the Allied forces advanced 70 miles to their start positions. In support, Allied air raids struck at Italian airfields, knocking out 29 aircraft on the ground. Pressing westwards, at 5am on 9 December, an hour-long artillery barrage bombarded the camp at Nibeiwa. The Italians reacted by reinforcing the eastern side of the camp, only to be attacked from the northwest by the Indian 11th Infantry Brigade and the 7th Royal Tank Regiment. By 8.30am, the camp was taken. Over 2,000 Italians were captured and their commander General Maletti was killed, for the loss of just eight allied officers and 48 troops.

The Indian 5th Infantry Brigade of the Indian 4th Division then pressed forwards to the camps of Tummar West and Tummar East. Both were taken that same day.

NARROW ESCAPE

While the camps at Tummar were being attacked, the 7th Armoured Division pressed north to Azziziya, where a 400-strong garrison surrendered. Selby Force, an 1,800-strong mixed unit under Brigadier AR Selby, took Maktla and attempted to seal off the westward escape routes, but the Italian 1st Libyan Colonial Infantry Division managed to escape the trap.

The enemy had been taken by surprise. Camp after camp fell. On 10 December, the Indian 16th Brigade and elements of the Indian 11th Brigade captured a primary objective, Sidi Barrani. Buqbuq also fell and yielded a large supply of weapons as well as a considerable number of prisoners. On 11 December, Sofafi fell. The Indian 4th Infantry Division was transferred to Sudan that same day, and on 14 December O'Connor was given the untested Australian 6th Division as a replacement. This didn't slow the Allied advance though. By 16 December, the Allies had advanced to – and captured – the town of Sollum.

As Italian Lieutenant Paolo Colacicchi put it, "It's an extraordinary thing, how we moved into Egypt, by sending out these enormous columns, not very well protected as we didn't have many tanks, and then each one of them settling down



Long march: A column of Italian prisoners on the march from Sidi Barrani, 16 December 1940



UIG via Getty Images

Moment of relief: Allied troops prepare to seize the seaport of Bardia in Libya from the Italians





"I want one thousand Italian dead to be able to sit at the conference table"

General Mussolini

in a fortified camp. This helped General O'Connor a lot."

Allied successes were achieved despite British armour again suffering reliability problems, largely due to the affect of dust and sand on the tanks, especially their tracks. As General David Belchem of the Western Desert Force explained, "O'Connor undertook an operation which was due to last about four days, which was the limit for the available tanks, which were nearly worn out, and for our administration in terms of supplying water, fuel and ammunition. He achieved complete surprise, got behind the Italian positions at Sidi Barrani, and in the morning, the Italian resistance collapsed."

EXTENDED OFFENSIVE

But the operation didn't end there. General Belchem continues, "O'Connor's great achievement was by using captured vehicles and captured dumps of water and fuel, he was able to maintain this four-day battle into what became an offensive lasting over a period of weeks, and resulted in taking him as far as Benghazi and beyond to El Agheila. Mussolini had said, 'I want one thousand Italian dead to be able to sit at the conference table', but it cost many more than that."

The advance continued into the New Year. On 5 January, the port of Bardia was taken after a three-day battle. Around 36,000 prisoners were captured, along with 708 vehicles, 12 medium tanks, 216 field guns, numerous artillery and anti-tank guns and a large pumping station that supplied the Allied troops with water. Although inexperienced, the Australian troops proved their worth and impressed the U.S. The *Washington Times-Herald* ran the headline, "Hardy Wild-Eyed Aussies Called World's Finest Troops."

Tobruk was captured after another three-day battle, which followed a siege of almost two weeks. The attack started on 21 January, when the Australian infantry again fought admirably as they knocked out dug-in Italian positions. That evening a ceasefire was offered, but General Petassi Manella, commanding officer of the garrison of 25,000, had been told by Mussolini to fight until the last man.

General Manella's cause wasn't helped when Italian bombers acting in support of Tobruk's beleaguered defenders bombed what they thought was an Allied troop formation. It was actually a prisoner of war camp, and there were hundreds of casualties among the 8,000 captured Italians housed there. Tobruk fell on 23 January, with all nearby outposts in Allied hands by the following day.

On 7 February, what was left of the Italian 10th Army surrendered. Two days later, the Allied forces reached El Agheila, Libya. In around ten weeks, they had advanced around 500 miles, capturing 130,000 Italian troops, 400 tanks and almost 1,300 artillery pieces. Allied casualties were under 500 dead and a little over 1,200 wounded. But while the Libyan capital Tripoli was now within General O'Connor's grasp, he wasn't allowed to advance further and finish off the Italians in North Africa once and for all. Instead, Churchill ordered a halt, transferring O'Connor's best troops to Greece, which was already at war with Italy and expected a German attack soon. It was a decision that did not sit well with the British General. "We couldn't do Tripoli and Greece at the same time," he later said. "But we could have done Tripoli, and still left the options open for Greece. If we had advanced, we could've pushed [Mussolini] out."

THE AFRIKA KORPS

Hitler reinforces the humiliated Italians with a small force commanded by one of its most capable officers, but could it turn the tide of defeat?

Six months after entering the war, Italy had been totally humiliated. Her 10th Army was all but destroyed, her North African territories overrun and only the withdrawal of Allied troops for the Greek campaign had stopped General O'Connor pushing Italy out of the continent altogether. But Hitler was to come to Mussolini's rescue by sending over a relatively small but highly mechanised force commanded by one of his best.

The Afrika Korps was formed in January 1941. Although Hitler had little strategic interest in North Africa, he was concerned about the psychological effect total defeat would have on his Italian allies. He also preferred to tie up the British and Commonwealth troops in this theatre, rather than see them deployed elsewhere. So on his personal orders, a unit was put together to bolster the Italian forces and provide protection against the superior British armour. This force would consist of two Panzer Divisions (around 300 tanks in total), an infantry regiment, and an artillery battalion. Deployment to the Libyan capital Tripoli, which was still in Italian hands, would be codenamed Operation Sonnenblume ('Sunflower'), and to command the Afrika Korps, Hitler chose one of his most capable officers: General Erwin Rommel.

FIGHTING SPIRIT

Rommel arrived in Tripoli on 12 February, with the first of his units landing two days later. His orders were to reinforce the Italians, 'to stiffen Graziani and make sure he did not retreat to Tripoli without a fight.'

But Rommel was far too attack-minded to sit still. His units were sent to the frontline as soon as they arrived. Morale was good. As Afrika Korps gunner Fritz Zimmermann put it, "We wanted an adventure, and nobody thought about getting killed. We were all in high spirits."

XIII CORPS

Rommel was unaware that the depleted Allied Western Desert Force – now renamed XIII Corps – had been given orders to advance no further than El Agheila and expected to face an early Allied attack. He set up his defences at the small port of Sirte, midway between Tripoli and Benghazi. XIII Corps was considerably weakened by the redeployment of its best troops to Greece and the 7th Armoured Division to the Nile Delta, with their replacements proving inexperienced and under-equipped, but Rommel himself also lacked desert experience.

On 13 March, while flying from Tripoli to Sirte, he hit a sandstorm. Despite Rommel's insistence they fly on, the pilot turned back, forcing him to make

his journey by car. Rommel later wrote, "Now we realised what little idea we had of the tremendous force of such a storm. Immense clouds of reddish dust obscured all visibility and forced the car's speed to a crawl. We gasped in breath painfully through handkerchiefs held over our faces and sweat poured off our bodies in the unbearable heat. So this was the Ghibli [sandstorm]. I silently breathed my apologies to the pilot."

HATCHING A PLAN

As the Afrika Korps arrived in Tripoli and moved to the front, their deployment slowed by the limited facilities offered by the Libyan port, Rommel came up with a cunning plan to fool the enemy into over-estimating the number of tanks he had. As Captain Hans-Otto Behrendt, Adjutant to Rommel, recalls, "In the port of Tripoli in February/March 1941, Rommel told my friend, Lieutenant Hunt, an engineer, 'Hunt, I hear you can build me 150 tanks.' The man looked stupefied, and Rommel told him, 'Don't you have timber here in the harbour, and canvas from sails to make 150 covers

"We gasped in breath painfully through handkerchiefs held over our faces..."

General Erwin Rommel

THE AFRIKA KORPS

*Rock and a hard place:
An Afrika Korps MG34
crew in the Western
Desert, 1942*



for Volkswagen? So you can give me 150 tanks! Those tanks misled the British."

XIII Corps suffered a setback in mid-March when General O'Connor was laid up sick in Cairo with a stomach ailment. His replacement, General Philip Neame, had won a Victoria Cross in World War I and a gold medal for rifle shooting in the 1924 Olympics, but he had no experience of desert warfare. When his Commander in Chief General Wavell met him on 16 March, he "found Neame pessimistic and asking for all sorts of reinforcements which I hadn't got. And his tactical dispositions were just crazy. I came back anxious and depressed from this visit, but there was nothing much I could do about it."

A BITTER BLOW

At the end of March, before all of his troops had even arrived in Africa, Rommel launched an offensive. Taking full advantage of his force's extreme mobility and speed, on 24 March he quickly captured the Allied forward position at El Agheila, and pressed on to take Agedabia. Benghazi was less than a hundred miles away. The Axis forces were now advancing in three separate groups. On Wavell's instructions, Neame abandoned Benghazi on 4 April. That same day, a mostly Italian force entered the town.

A few days later, a staff car containing General Neame, the returning General O'Connor and a Brigadier got lost and ran into a detachment of German motorcycle troops. On his capture, O'Connor later said, "It was miles behind our own front. We drove into the one bit of the desert into which the Germans had sent a reconnaissance group. It was a great shock, and I never thought it would happen to me." It was a bitter blow for the XIII Corps too. The Allies had lost their best General.

INFERIORITY COMPLEX

By mid-April, the British and Commonwealth forces had been pushed back to where they started, on the Egypt-Libya border. As historian Professor Martin Kitchen explained, "The British had inferior weapons, an inadequate communications network and poor aerial reconnaissance. Most important of all, they totally failed to exploit the possibilities afforded by the desert for a war of movement. If they stayed put, they were overrun or bypassed. If they moved, it was usually to retreat."

But an important target still eluded Rommel. The key Libyan port of Tobruk, 93 miles from the Egyptian border, remained in Allied hands.

THE GERMAN COMMANDERS IN NORTH AFRICA

Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel

Born in Heidenheim in southern Germany in 1891 to a former artillery lieutenant and his wife, Erwin Rommel was one of five children.

Rommel joined the Württemberg Infantry Regiment in 1910. World War I would erupt four years later, a conflict that took Rommel to Italy, Romania and France, where he served with distinction as a frontline officer, eschewing a career in the general staff.

Appointed commander of the 7th Panzer Division, he proved himself to be a daring and brilliant leader during the rapid conquest of France in 1940. In February 1941 he was given command of the Afrika Korps, with whom he secured a string of stunning victories before his eventual defeat to the mightier Allied forces. Later entrusted with securing the Atlantic Wall, he was forced to commit suicide in 1944.



"By mid-April the British and Commonwealth forces had been pushed back"

Oberst Fritz Bayerlein

A winner of the Knight's Cross (which can be seen here hanging from his collar), Fritz Bayerlein saw action in Poland, France and the Soviet Union prior to becoming Chief of Staff for Rommel's Afrika Korps. After the frustration of Germany's ambitions in Africa, Bayerlein took charge of the encircled 3rd Panzer Division. Despite being surrounded in the Ukrainian city of Kirovograd, Bayerlein managed to engineer an unlikely escape. He repeated the feat in France with the Panzer Lehr Division, guiding it out of the Falaise pocket as the Allies advanced. The mauled division survived to take part in the audacious but fundamentally doomed Ardennes Offensive.



Generalmajor Hermann-Bernhard Ramcke

A savage war criminal and fanatical Nazi, prior to World War II Hermann-Bernhard Ramcke had served in the Imperial German Navy during World War I. His ferocious efforts against the British in Flanders earned him the Prussian Military Service Cross.

After leading paratroopers on a killing spree in Crete in 1941, Ramcke was transferred to North Africa. Here he would lead his parachute brigade out of a British trap during a general withdrawal, losing 450 men. For his tenacity in the face of such odds he received the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross. He would later oversee a formidable defence of the port of Brest before being captured in September 1944.



ROMMEL: THE DESERT FOX

Who was Erwin Rommel, and what did the celebrated German officer bring to the North African theatre on arriving in early 1941?

During World War I, in France, Italy and Romania, Erwin Rommel quickly gained a reputation for courage and quick thinking. He was first a Lieutenant and later a Lieutenant-Colonel, spending most of the war in the elite Alpenkorps. In September 1914, he was awarded the Iron Cross, Second Class when he fought three French soldiers despite having run out of ammunition, an action in which he was wounded. In January 1915, he led his men through '100 yards of barbed wire' and took four French bunkers, holding them against a French counterattack. For this, he won the Iron Cross, First Class.

Between the wars, he worked as a military instructor in Potsdam. Unlike many of his colleagues, he preferred to engage the students and get their own thoughts on situations rather than teach traditional military theories. As one student recalls him asking, "Never mind what [Prussian military theorist] Clausewitz thought, what do you think?" In the late Thirties, he commanded Hitler's personal guards.

In February 1940, he was given command of the 7th Panzer Division. It was his first command in an armoured unit, but his talent for the element of surprise by taking advantage of manoeuvrability were suited for a tank division. During the invasion of France in May 1940, he proved highly adept at using speed and manoeuvrability to his advantage. In fact, the 7th Panzer Division became known as the Ghost Division, as it moved so rapidly it often

lost communication with German High Command. It was the first German unit to reach the Channel, and also set the record for the furthest tank advance in a single day, by covering 200 miles.

After the French surrender, 7th Panzer was sent to Paris to prepare for Operation Sea Lion, the German invasion of Britain, but when it became apparent this would not go ahead, he returned to Germany as a national hero and was promoted to Lieutenant General. He was then, of course, put in command of the Afrika Korps in North Africa, where he was nicknamed the 'Desert Fox' by British journalists.

LEADING FROM THE FRONT

Rommel was a very attack-minded commander who was quite prepared to take risks. This brought him the respect of both his troops and the enemy. As Sergeant Sam Bradshaw of the British 7th Armoured Division said, "Rommel was a man who exploited every situation. He led from the front. Most of the time he was at the front line with his soldiers, and we were against a very professional army. A very good army, and better equipped than we were."

His bold actions inevitably brought accusations of recklessness, but Rommel argued quick thinking and careful consideration were not mutually exclusive. As he later wrote, "It is my experience that bold decisions give the best promise of success. But one must differentiate between tactical boldness and a military gamble. A bold operation is one in which success is not a certainty, but which in case of failure leaves one with sufficient forces

in hand to cope with whatever situation may arise. A gamble, on the other hand, is an operation that can lead either to victory or to the complete destruction of one's force. Situations can arise where even gamble may be justified – as, for instance, when in the normal course of events defeat is merely a matter of time, when the gaining of time is therefore pointless and the only chance lies in an operation of great risk."

COMPASSIONATE ACTS

Although willing to accept casualties, Rommel did not tolerate an unnecessary loss of life. As he often observed, "Germany will need men after the war as well." He showed a healthy respect for the enemy and for civilians caught up in the conflict too. Captured prisoners were treated well and always given sufficient rations, and the Afrika Korps was never accused of war crimes.

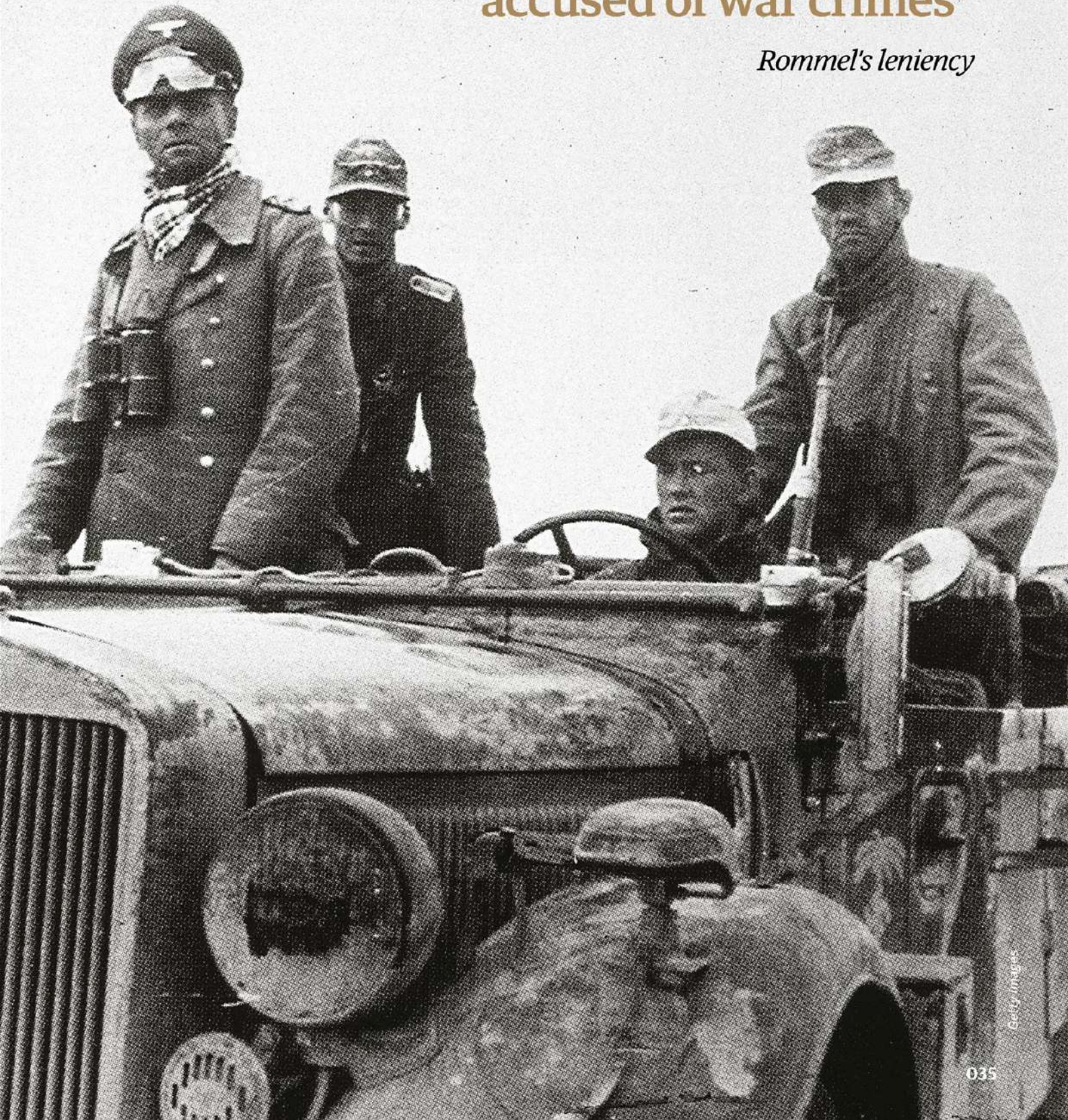
While in France, he disobeyed Hitler's direct order to deport the country's Jewish population, and also ignored an instruction to execute Jewish prisoners of war and captured commandos. When strengthening the Atlantic Wall, a series of defences in northern France and Scandinavia, he insisted that French workers be paid for their efforts and not be used as slave labour.

In the House of Commons, Churchill described Rommel as "a daring and skilful opponent," a comment for which the PM was almost censured. He was unrepentant. Writing in 1949, he said, "[Rommel's] ardour, and daring, inflicted grievous disasters upon us. But he deserves the salute which I made him in January 1942."

Recon: Field Marshall Erwin
Rommel takes a ride in the front
of a jeep with the 15th Panzer
Division in North Africa

"Captured prisoners were
treated well and always
given sufficient rations; the
Afrika Korps were never
accused of war crimes"

Rommel's leniency



THE FIGHTING INTENSIFIES



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OF EL ALAMEIN

By mid-April, Rommel's advance had pushed Allied lines back to about 100 miles east of Tobruk, but the garrison in the port itself held out. This was mostly thanks to the Australian 9th Division, though its commander, Lieutenant General Leslie Morshead, had about 25,000 troops at his disposal, including some British and Indian units. Rommel wasn't about to go on the offensive: with Cairo in his sights, he was determined to push on...

Lying low: British soldiers face a barrage of Italo-German artillery while defending the garrison of Tobruk, November 1941





TOBRUK BESIEGED

Rommel had pushed the Allied forces back to the Egyptian border, but the important sea port of Tobruk proved a tougher nut to crack

As the only major port on the North African coast between Sfax in Tunisia, just over 1,000 miles to the west, and Alexandria in Egypt, more than 400 miles east, Tobruk was of prime strategic importance, especially as the Allied garrison now threatened the Axis' ever-lengthening supply lines. Rommel was as keen to take it as the Allies were to hold on to it. For the Allies, it was also a matter of pride. As Field Marshal Lord Harding, Commander of the 7th Armoured Division, put it, "There had been no light at the end of the tunnel at all since the withdrawal from Dunkirk. I think, for political and above all morale reasons, the morale of the people of this country, it was terribly important to show we could hold the Germans."

Rommel had planned to surround the city before attacking in a pincer movement from both the east and the west, but believing it to be poorly defended, he decided this was unnecessary. Instead, on 10 April he sent General Heinrich von Prittwitz und Gaffron's 15th Panzer Division to attack from the west along the Derna road. He had underestimated the tenacity of the Australians. The 20th and 26th Brigades of Australian 9th Division held covering positions outside the Allied perimeter, while the 9th's 24th Brigade and the 18th Australian Infantry Brigade, which had just arrived, protected the perimeter itself. Three German armoured cars were soon sent into retreat using two captured Italian field guns, while a tank attack was halted by blowing up a bridge crossing a valley on the approach to the

"For the morale of the people, it was terribly important to show we could hold the Germans"

Field Marshal Lord Harding

city. Surveying the battle front in a staff car, against the advice of his staff, von Prittwitz got too close to the captured Italian field guns and was killed. After a three-hour fight, the Germans retreated.

With his first attack repelled, Rommel went back to his original plan and besieged the port. On the east side was the German 5th Light Division, to the south, the 15th Panzer Division, and in the west was the Italian Brescia Division. Three Italian infantry divisions and a division of Italian armour were held in reserve. Facing them, Major-General Morshead divided the 30-mile perimeter around the port into three sectors. The Australian 9th Division was to hold all of them, with the 26th Brigade in the west, the 20th to the south and the 24th in the east. The 18th Australian Infantry Brigade was held in reserve.

Rommel launched his second attack on 11 April, with the 5th Panzer Regiment of the 5th Light Division attacking the 20th Brigade just after noon. This attack too was repulsed by the Australians, with five German tanks destroyed. At 3pm, 400 German infantrymen were also thrown back, and at 4pm a third attack

Eyes on the sky: British gunners manning a captured Breda gun in the beleaguered town of Tobruk prepare to fire at any German aircraft that come within range

"Rommel launched his second attack. This too was repulsed, with five German tanks destroyed"



An Australian inspection, 1941

Australian MK VI's Vickers tanks and MK1's Bren gun carriers of the 9th Australian Division Cavalry Regiment await inspection in the Syria desert. They fought the Vichy French Army of the Levant during Operation Exporter, a campaign waged to wrest control of Syria and Lebanon from Nazi-occupied France.

On 8 June 1941 the British and Australians, supported by Free French troops, poured into Syria and Lebanon from British-held Palestine. By 14 July the Vichy authorities had signed an armistice, ceding control of its Middle Eastern holdings to the Free French.



from 700 infantry supported by German and Italian tanks got bogged down in anti-tank traps, and was thrown back with large numbers of casualties when four British tanks arrived in support. Further attacks over the next two days were also repulsed.

Australian infantryman Corporal John Edmondson was posthumously awarded the VC for extreme bravery during these actions. According to his citation, "On the night of 13–14 April, 1941, a party of German infantry broke through the wire defences at Tobruk and established themselves with at least six machine guns, mortars and two small field pieces.

"It was decided to attack them with bayonets, and a party consisting of one officer, Corporal Edmondson and five privates, took part in the charge. During the counterattack Corporal Edmondson was wounded in the neck and stomach but continued to advance under heavy fire and killed one enemy with his bayonet. Later, his officer had his bayonet in one of the enemy and was grasped about the legs by him, when another attacked him from behind. He called for help, and Corporal Edmondson, who was some yards away, immediately came to his assistance and in spite of his wounds, killed both of the enemy. This action undoubtedly saved his officer's life."

Edmondson himself was not so fortunate. He succumbed to his wounds and died shortly afterwards.

NAVAL SUPPORT

Although completely cut off by land, the port continued to be supported and supplied by the Royal Navy. According to one of the port's British defenders, "It was bare rations in Tobruk. Although one must thank the Navy, as they did a wonderful job. We were pestered with blaring loudspeakers on the perimeter. We were called the self-imposed prisoners of Tobruk. Rommel's propaganda machine bellowed at us to give up. We took no notice. We said, 'we'll stick it out.' We knew they couldn't get in."

Rommel's tactics were coming in for criticism from his officers. Professor Martin Kitchen gives an example in *Rommel's Desert War* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

"Colonel Max von Herff ... said that nobody understood the first attack on Tobruk. As soon as a new unit arrived at the front it was thrown into the attack against a greatly superior force with predictable results.

"Junior officers were at a loss to understand Rommel's orders, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction."

He might have been the master of movement, but the Desert Fox was

"Rommel's propaganda machine bellowed at us to give up. We took no notice"

British soldier in Tobruk

proving to be less adept at breaking down solid defences. So he tried a new tactic.

After an intense shelling and the softening up of Allied defensive positions with Stuka dive bombers, enemy tanks armed with grappling hooks would destroy part of a barbed wire barricade, with German troops and tanks storming the gap.

Objections were once again raised, arguing the siege force was still not well equipped enough for such an undertaking. Some units from the 15th Panzer Division, for example, were still in Italy, and the 115 Infantry Regiment was also in transit.

Pleas for a postponement were dismissed, and the attack went ahead on 30 April.

FUEL SHORTAGES

The Australian 24th Brigade lost several command posts as the Axis forces penetrated about two miles into the perimeter zone, capturing the highest fort in the region before being stopped by a minefield. An Australian counterattack on 3 May was unsuccessful: about a sixth of Tobruk was now in German hands. But the supply lines maintained by the Royal Navy remained active. After beating the Italian Navy at the Battle of Taranto in November 1940 – which saw the British launch the first ever all-aircraft ship-to-ship naval attack – the Royal Navy was supreme in the Mediterranean. Allied convoys could cross almost without incident, while Rommel's were harassed, and frequently sunk. This left the German commander short of fuel.

It was fortunate for Tobruk's defenders that the initial attack on the port struck at their strongest point. Indeed, it was also fortunate the Afrika Korps was geared towards rapid movement and fast strikes where the enemy least expected rather than to battling entrenched, well-defended positions.

As April turned into May, both sides prepared for their next move. Rommel drew up plans for his next attack on the port, and Wavell planned Operation Battleaxe, an attempt to relieve Tobruk that would start with the preparatory Operation Brevity in mid-May.



Plan of action: Under increasing pressure, General Rommel and the Italian General Clavi discuss tactics for their attack on Tobruk



Roger Violet via Getty Images

ALLIED ATTACKS FOUNDER

The Allies attempt to relieve Tobruk and recapture lost ground, but is their equipment good enough for them to take on the Afrika Korps?

In the early summer of 1941, the desert war stalled. The Allies were under-strength and unable to mount a large-scale attack, while fuel shortages and the Tobruk garrison threatening his supply lines meant Rommel couldn't advance. That's not to say nothing happened. Wavell believed "the enemy strength in armoured fighting vehicles in the forward fighting area was small, and he was in difficulty with his supplies". Operation Battleaxe planned to push the German and Italian forces out of eastern Libya and relieve the siege of Tobruk, which had become an important symbol of British defiance. This began on 15 May with Operation Brevity, an attempt to gain territory from which to launch the main attack later in the year.

The key objectives of Operation Brevity were to take the Halfaya Pass, a strategically important gap in the escarpment of high ground stretching along the Egyptian-Libyan coast, to push the Axis forces back beyond the port of Sollum and nearby barracks, and to capture Fort Capuzzo. The Allied forces would then press towards Tobruk, but

only as far as supplies would allow. At this stage, holding the territory already gained would be more important than pushing back the front still further.

Advancing in three columns, Brigadier William Gott made impressive initial gains, taking the Halfaya Pass against stiff Italian opposition and briefly capturing Fort Capuzzo, before a German counterattack recaptured it. Fearing his forward units would be caught in the open desert, Gott withdrew back to the newly captured Halfaya Pass the following day, ending the aptly named Operation Brevity with only slender gains.

And even these gains were not to last. Rommel realised the strategic importance of the pass for his supply lines into Egypt. On 26 May, he launched Operation Skorpion. Three Panzer assault groups under Colonel Maximilian von Herff were deployed. The following day they attacked, pushing back the 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards and its supporting units. Fearing they could be surrounded, they were forced to withdraw. The Afrika Korps had retaken all the ground won by Operation Brevity.

As the summer drew on, flies were an increasing problem for both sides. As

"You'd have a brew, and you couldn't drink it without flies settling in it"

Rifleman Horace Suckling



Fire power: British gunners grade shell fuses in front of their camouflaged position in the Halfaya Pass on the Egyptian front





Heavy weapons: A British anti-aircraft gun crew try to find some shelter from the searing heat in Tobruk, August 1941



well as being a nuisance, they also carried disease. As Rifleman Horace Suckling of The Rifle Brigade explained, "The flies were around you before you could say 'Jack Robinson'. You'd have a brew, and you couldn't drink it without flies settling in it." British troops held competitions to see who could kill the most flies, but as one trooper recalled, "The flies were so fattened by living on the dead that every time you killed them, the smell got into you and caused stomach upsets. We had orders from Division Headquarters to stop killing the flies. We just had to let them go." Naturally, the Germans faced a similar situation. Major-General Johannes Streich kept a giant cardboard replica of the Knight's Cross with a fly in the centre in his headquarters, and each day awarded it to the staff officer who killed the most flies – much to Rommel's annoyance.

Desperately needing a victory to raise morale on the home front and silence his political opponents, Churchill put pressure on Wavell, in whom he was beginning to lose confidence. Operation Battleaxe was put into effect as planned, despite the loss of the ground won during Operation Brevity and the objections of Wavell, who protested he had insufficient forces for the assault and that his tanks were too slow, unreliable and lightly armed. But an impatient Prime Minister pointed to some dubious evidence from the British military intelligence code breakers at Bletchley Park and overruled his Commander in Chief of the Middle East Command.

BATTLE PLAN

Battleaxe had three stages: first, the enemy was to be pushed back in the coastal region of the Libyan/Egyptian border, recapturing the Halfaya Pass, Sollum, Fort Capuzzo, Hafid Ridge and Sidi Azeiz. This would effectively take the ground targeted by Operation Brevity. Second, the XIII Corps (formerly the Western Desert Force) would capture the area around Tobruk and El Adem, before finally securing these gains by taking Derna and Mechili. In overall command of ground operations was Lieutenant-General Noel Beresford-Peirse, Commander of the XIII Corps. The plan was little more than a repeat of Brevity, albeit on a larger scale.

Rommel, meanwhile, was fully expecting the Allied assault. Not for the first time, his field intelligence gleaned from wireless transmissions and captured documents had given him fair warning about the British intentions, and he was quite prepared to meet the attack head-on. After Brevity, he had built a line of fortifications designed to hold back an Allied attack from Egypt. Rommel himself decided to stay at Tobruk in case the

Australian garrison tried to break out of its fortified perimeter during the battle. This caused communication problems due to a lack of signals companies; for much of the action, Rommel and his senior staff at Tobruk had little idea of what was going on. Even so, he was confident in his defences and the forces behind them. What concerns he had were logistical, most notably a lack of fuel. As he later wrote, "Unfortunately, our petrol stocks were badly depleted, and it was with some anxiety that we contemplated the coming British attack, for we knew that our moves would be decided more by the petrol gauge than by tactical requirements."

Operation Battleaxe was initially successful in the centre, taking out two batteries of artillery before capturing Fort Capuzzo by noon. Several attacks were repulsed that afternoon, though most of them were merely probing strikes designed to lure the British Matilda tanks onto the German anti-tank guns. The coastal right flank, however, fared less well. Attacking the Halfaya Pass, 15 of its 18 tanks were lost. On the left flank, the 7th Armoured Division ran into Italian emplacements at Hafid Ridge, in which were concealed 88mm anti-tank guns and machine-gun posts. Of its 90 tanks, 48 were lost. By the end of the first day, only Fort Capuzzo had been taken.

PANZER ATTACK

A little progress was made on the second day. After a counterattack at Capuzzo was repulsed, the Scots Guards pushed west and captured the Sollum barracks. On the west flank, the 7th Armoured Division engaged the tanks of the German 5th Light Division, but ran into problems when the Panzers opened fire while well outside the range of the less well armed British tanks. Firing at this distance did little damage to the tanks themselves, but destroyed the artillery pieces they were towing. With the artillery out of the way, the Panzers were able to close the gap, retreating behind their own anti-tank guns should the British advance and engage. Once again, the inferiority of British armour had taken its toll. By the evening, the 7th Armoured was down to 21 tanks. The following day, the troops at Fort Capuzzo were withdrawn.

Wavell reported back to Churchill, "I am sorry to have to report that 'Battleaxe' has been a failure." No gains had been made at all. With British armour severely depleted and no reserves available, the way was open for Rommel to advance into Egypt. Unsurprisingly, Churchill was furious. He replaced General Wavell as Commander in Chief, Middle East Command with General Claude Auchinleck, formerly Commander-in-Chief, India.





Taking a break outside of Benghazi, August 1943

The 98th Bombardment Group takes some rest at a U.S. air base near Benghazi, Libya. Piloting B-24s, these men conducted daring bombing runs on harbour and shipping installations in Libya, Tunisia, Greece, Crete, Italy and Sicily. They also targetted railways and airdomes and later undertook long-range missions to obliterate oilfields, heavy industry and communications infrastructure.



THE SIEGE IS LIFTED

As a new commander took the field, could Operation Crusader succeed where Brevity and Battleaxe failed? Could it relieve Tobruk?

The North African theatre became known for the honourable way in which both sides fought. There were frequent truces to collect the wounded, for example, and numerous individual acts of bravery in this respect.

Australian Private John Butler remembers such an encounter during the siege of Tobruk. "[I was] in the act of drawing a pin [to arm a grenade], when a voice was heard from a stranger, 'stay, Aussie – we have two wounded diggers here'... 'The Aussies said the Germans had shot them and then went out at great personal risk, brought them in and dressed their wounds, gave them hot coffee and then sent for their medical assistance. Thank God there is chivalry.'"

But as historian Sir Max Hastings observed in *All Hell Let Loose: The World at War 1939-1945* (Harper Press, 2011), "There were disadvantages to this 'civilised' approach to making war. 'Allied troops who regarded their tactical position as hopeless saw little risk and no shame in surrendering, rather than fight to the death or submit themselves to a waterless desert. British commanders, and their superiors in London, became increasingly dismayed by local capitulations and the excessive sporting spirit of the campaign.'"

ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

However, the British commandos who tried to assassinate Rommel on the night of the 17/18 November were far from dismayed by this apparent sporting spirit. The team of 30 raided what they thought was his HQ at Beda Littoria, around 200 miles behind enemy lines.

In fact, Rommel was no longer based there, and the officers' names on the doors photographed by a spy were out of date. Four Germans were killed in the daring raid, along with one commando – Lieutenant-Colonel Keyes, the son of Admiral Sir Roger Keyes – who was posthumously awarded a Victoria Cross for his actions.

Unable to escape by sea due to storms, only two of the men made it back to Allied lines, with the rest being taken prisoner. Ignoring Hitler's standing order that captured enemy commandos should be shot, Rommel – the very man whom they had tried to kill – insisted they be treated like ordinary prisoners of war, and buried the dead commando with full military honours.

OPERATION CRUSADER

The assassination attempt was a prelude to General Auchinleck's first major action in his new post: Operation Crusader.

The Auk (as Auchinleck came to be known) was a highly decorated commander, but he knew comparatively little about the tanks that were proving crucial to success in the desert war. Auchinleck reinforced the British and Commonwealth units to create the Eighth Army, with Lieutenant-General Alan Cunningham in command.

The Allies were by now far better equipped than before, but key problems still remained.

Unlike the German forces, the Allies had very few tank transporters, so their tanks had to drive long distances on their tracks, which were vulnerable to the effects of the desert dust.

As one British soldier observed in the 1973 Thames TV documentary *The World at War: The Desert – North Africa*

Resting place: The British army in North Africa 1942. A soldier stops to inspect the grave of a German tank crew

"British tactics were set in the past"

(1940–1943), "[British tanks] were very poor mechanically.

"There were parts missing, parts not connected properly. Every track is connected to the next track by a pin. That's a lot of moving parts.

"The desert was sometimes powdery but sometimes hard, gritty sand. Water is a lubricant, so tanks are best suited to muddy conditions."

Operation Crusader began on 18 November 1941, with British, Indian, South African and New Zealander forces all moving into action. For once, Rommel was slow to grasp the situation and to identify the focus of the Allied advance.

Striking from the Eighth Army base at Mersa Matruh, the 7th and 22nd Armoured Brigades crossed the Libyan border and struck northwest for Tobruk. XIII Corps and the New Zealand Division advanced with the 7th Infantry Brigade of the 4th Indian Division and the 4th Armoured Brigade on their flanks.

The following day, the 22nd Armoured ran into the Italian Ariete Armoured Division around Bir El Gubi. It lost 40 of its Crusader tanks to Italian anti-tank guns as a result.

TACTICAL NOUS

These sort of losses were typical in the early days of Operation Crusader. Although now better equipped, British tactics were still set in the past. As General David Belchem of the Western Desert Force recalls, "We had been trained to fire on the move, to execute a sort of cavalry charge on tracks, and handle armour in that way.

"Germans had studied this problem much more than we, between the wars, and also of course Rommel had experience from the war in northern France, and so had many of his tank crews. And they appreciated that a tank's best action against his enemy is to wait for him to come on, sitting in a hull-hidden position, and if they're caught in the open, to decoy the enemy onto their own anti-tank gun lines."

In the first five days, Cunningham lost two thirds of his tanks. Many were mechanical failures that were abandoned because unlike the Germans, the Allies simply didn't have the means to recover them. As a veteran complained, "Their equipment had to come just as far as ours, but they seemed to value it more, and made every effort to recover their tanks as soon as it got dusk."

Feeling the battle was lost, Cunningham wanted to withdraw.

Captured: German Panzer crews march towards a POW camp near Tobruk after surrendering during the Battle of Libya, 1942







Plan of attack: A photograph of a brigadier instructing his tank commanders using a sand table in Tobruk, November 1941



Instead, Auchinleck relieved him of command and replaced him with Major-General Neil Ritchie.

There were more setbacks in late November and early December, as New Zealand troops were defeated at Sidi Azeiz by Panzers and infantry. The German 15th Panzer Division, despite being outnumbered two to one, forced back British tanks and exposed another New Zealand force at Ed Duda. But as Rommel's tanks ran out of fuel once more, the battle began to turn.

On 3 December, New Zealand forces on the Bardia Road inflicted a heavy defeat on German infantry, and Indian troops pushed back the Germans at Capuzzo.

ENEMY ENCOUNTER

In All Hell Let Loose: The World at War 1939-1945, Sergeant Sam Bradshaw recalls an encounter with an injured German during Operation Crusader.

"I drew alongside and called out, 'Are you Italian?' He replied, in very good English, 'No, I'm not a bloody Italian, I'm a German,' obviously annoyed at the suggestion. He was wounded, so I gave him a lift on the tank [and] a drink of water. He gave me a Capstan cigarette. 'We got one of your supply columns,' he said. We saw some German armoured cars about 1,000 yards away and he rolled off the tank and hobbled towards them. My gunner traversed on to him and I shouted on the intercom 'Don't fire – let him go.' He turned around, saluted and called out cheekily, 'I'll see you in London.' I called back, 'Make it Berlin.'"

On 7 December 1941 – the same day the Japanese air force attacked the American Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor – Tobruk was relieved, and Rommel was forced to pull back 500 miles to El Agheila. On Christmas Eve, the Allies captured Benghazi. Operation Crusader drew to a close with the Germans and Italians having suffered 8,000 dead or wounded, and 30,000 captured or missing, as well as losing 340 tanks and over 300 aircraft. The Eighth Army's casualties were 2,900 dead, 7,300 wounded and 7,500 missing, along with 278 tanks and 300 aircraft.

But for the second time, Allied forces in North Africa were depleted as experienced divisions were withdrawn for use elsewhere. This time, Japan's entry into the war meant they were needed in Burma and the Far East. Field Marshal Lord Harding, Commander of the 7th Armoured Division, was disappointed. "An opportunity of getting something that was real and important in the Middle Eastern theatre was lost for the sake of something which was very doubtful and unlikely to pay off in the Far East."

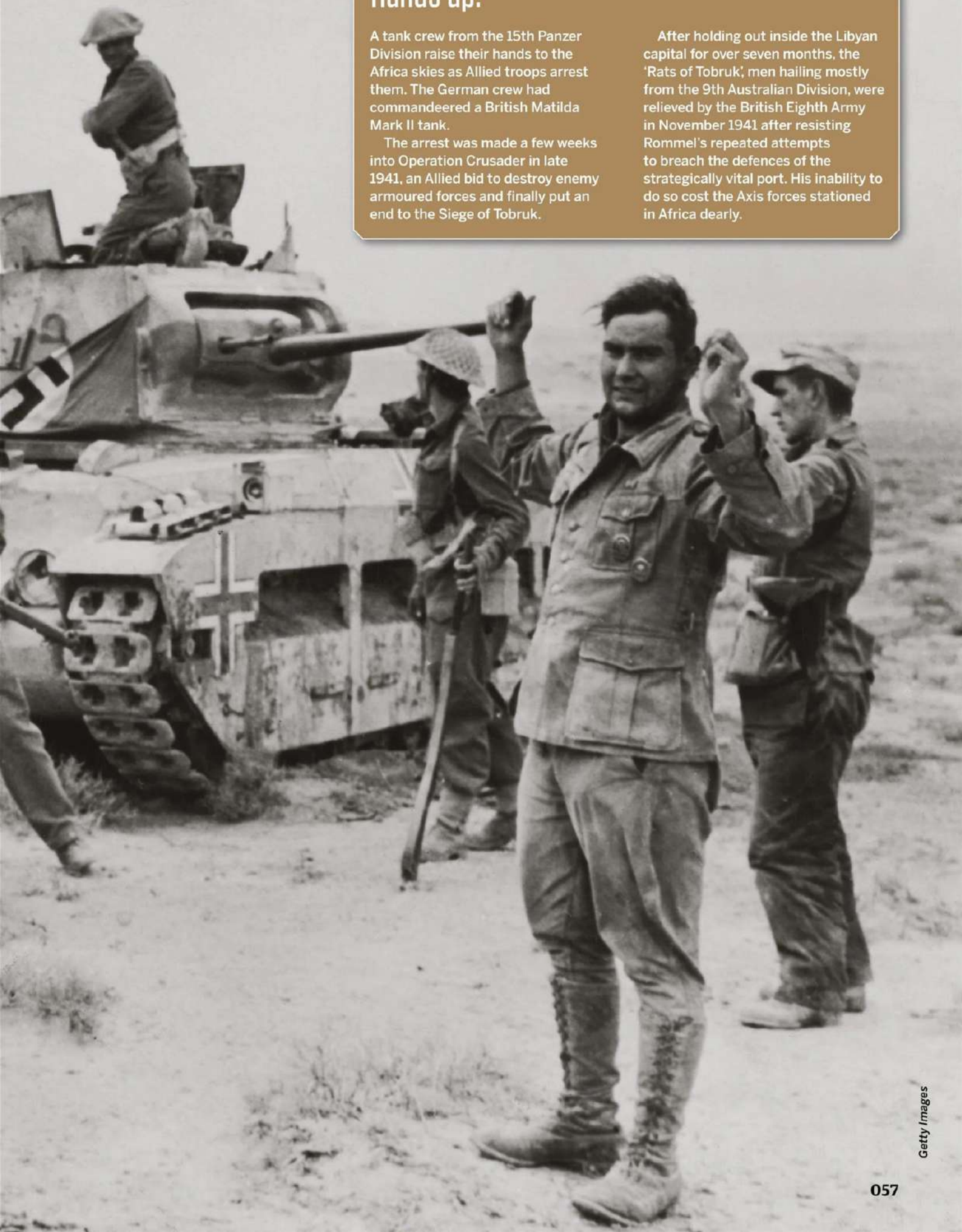


Hands up!

A tank crew from the 15th Panzer Division raise their hands to the Africa skies as Allied troops arrest them. The German crew had commandeered a British Matilda Mark II tank.

The arrest was made a few weeks into Operation Crusader in late 1941, an Allied bid to destroy enemy armoured forces and finally put an end to the Siege of Tobruk.

After holding out inside the Libyan capital for over seven months, the 'Rats of Tobruk', men hailing mostly from the 9th Australian Division, were relieved by the British Eighth Army in November 1941 after resisting Rommel's repeated attempts to breach the defences of the strategically vital port. His inability to do so cost the Axis forces stationed in Africa dearly.



THE ALLIES RETREAT

Rommel was on the offensive again and the Allies' gains were threatened by his advance. Could anything stop the Desert Fox?

Rommel launched his second major offensive on 21 January 1942, bolstered by reinforcements successfully delivered through Tripoli. The relatively inexperienced British 1st Armoured Division was scattered, and once again the Allies were pushed back. According to Sergeant Sam Bradshaw of the 7th Armoured Division, "I watched the Germans come over this ridge. We'd been told the Germans had very few tanks, and I thought, 'I don't know where they've got all the tanks from, but somebody's given us wrong information'. We really believed that we held all the aces, and then it all went wrong. And it's very hard then."

Agedabia was taken by Axis forces on 23 January; Benghazi fell six days later. The Allies were being pushed back into Eastern Libya. The weaknesses of the British tanks were once again starting to show. As Bradshaw remembers, "We knew the tanks we had weren't really up to scratch. We couldn't understand why each time we got new tanks they had these silly little peashooters [for guns] as we called them. The inevitable result would be that we'd suffer, and we'd lose a lot of people."

As the Afrika Korps pressed east, Tobruk was once again threatened. By the beginning of February, the front line had moved as far back as Gazala, just west of Tobruk. Here, the desert war stalled again, as both sides – but especially the Allies – dug in and prepared for a summer offensive.

Conditions throughout the desert campaign were very hot, and a lack of

water meant dysentery was a problem. As Lieutenant John McGregor of the Black Watch remembers, "The ration was two water bottles per day, one in the morning, one in the evening. Two pints, and that had to do for everything. For drinking, for washing, for washing of clothes – everything."

British cans for carrying water and fuel were of a poor design, and frequently split on the stony desert floor. As the German cans were far superior, the British made use of captured vessels and also copied their design, calling them 'Jerry cans', a term still used today.

Rations were of poor quality too, as Sergeant George Green of the Essex Regiment remembers.

"I can't remember, when you were in the line, having a proper meal. When you opened a can of bully beef, of course, it half floated out of the can because the heat had melted the fat. You used to get these hard biscuits, half of which were left over from the 1914 war."

During the day, it was hot enough to fry an egg on your tank's mudguard, but the nights could get very cold. As Green recalls, "You'd boil over all through the

"It seemed the destruction of the Eighth Army, and the resulting fall of Cairo, Egypt and the Suez Canal could be imminent"





In his sights: A soldier from the German Afrika Korps uses a telescope to look for enemy movements in the Western Desert

Getty Images

Preparing for a desert dogfight

British Hawker Hurricanes undergo maintenance on an airstrip in the Western Desert. A critical part of the Desert Air Force, they were superb ground-attack aircraft, sporting four 20mm cannon and a 500lb payload. However, they struggled badly when pitted against the superior Messerschmitt Bf 109 in the skies above Africa.





day, and then at night time, you couldn't wrap yourself up enough to keep warm."

According to Sergeant Bradshaw, "Desert sores were another problem. If you knocked yourself, which was inevitable with the tanks, it became festered within a matter of hours, and it spread like an ulcer."

America's formal entry into the war after the Pearl Harbor attack was to have a profound effect on the North African theatre. During the early 1942 stalemate, the United States supplied the British with 167 Medium M3 or 'Grant' tanks. With their 75mm main guns, they were much better armed than the tanks previously used by the Allies, and could engage German 5cm Pak 38 anti-tank guns from beyond the latter's effective range.

TACTICAL ERRORS

Major-General Ritchie planned an offensive, making use of his new tanks, for the end of May, but before he could launch his attack, Rommel seized the initiative. During the build-up, Ritchie had planned poorly, setting up a series of fortified camps protected by minefields, stretching from Gazala on the north coast to Bir Hakeim further south.

On 26 May, Rommel attacked, doing to Ritchie what General O'Connor had done to the Italian fortified positions about 18 months earlier, as a British serviceman remembers. "During the morning, we saw the dust going up where Jerry [the Germans] was. He was coming through

where the 7th Armoured Division were. It was like a fox in a hen coup."

As well as tactical errors, the new Grant tanks proved disappointing in the field. Despite being better armed, well armoured and more reliable than most Allied tanks, they performed poorly off-road. Their high silhouette also made them very difficult to conceal, and the side-mounted main gun was impossible to fire from a position in which the tank's hull was hidden too. Gazala and Bir Hakeim were taken, and once again, Tobruk was vulnerable. The town's fortifications had been neglected since the siege, and on 21 June it fell to the advancing Axis troops. Hitler was delighted, promoting Rommel to Field Marshal; Field Marshal Auchinleck was less pleased with his own subordinate: he sacked Ritchie, and took control of the Eighth Army himself.

The Allies were on the run, retreating ever further into Egypt. Mersa Matruh, about 140 miles east of the Libyan border, fell on 28 June. Only air superiority prevented a rout. In Cairo, the British High Command was getting worried.

"GHQ was beginning to muster papers, and there were things being destroyed," recalls Captain Donald Ramsay-Brown of the 2nd Gurkha Rifles. "There was a certain amount of preparation for what might happen if we lost the front."

It seemed that the destruction of the Eighth Army, and the resulting fall of Cairo, Egypt and crucially, the Suez Canal, could be imminent.

Heavy work: A 4cm anti-aircraft gun of the 21st tank division, German Afrika Korps, one of two armoured divisions in North Africa



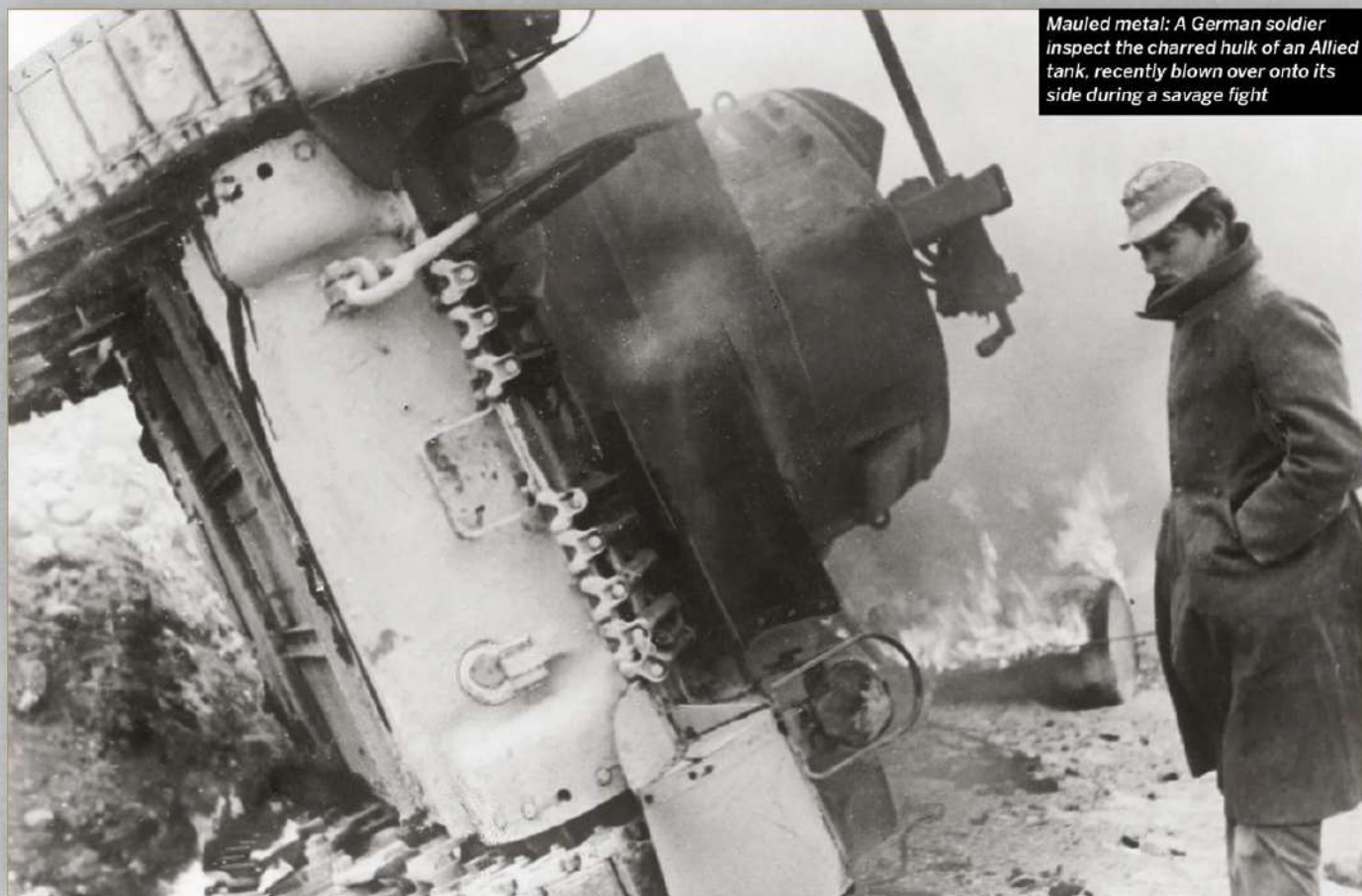
Flying tank: One of the American M-3 medium tanks in action in the Western Desert





Blitzing the Brits: Billowing thick black smoke, British armoured vehicles blaze in the desert, victims of devastating Axis firepower





Mauled metal: A German soldier inspect the charred hulk of an Allied tank, recently blown over onto its side during a savage fight



THE FIRST BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

After a speedy withdrawal and retreat, the British found an ideal location to make a stand. But could they stop the Desert Fox from reaching Cairo?

Falling back still further, the Eighth Army found an ideal location to dig in and make a stand. About 65 miles from Alexandria and 150 miles west of Cairo was a small, insignificant railway station not far from the coast. Ten miles to its south was the Ruweisat Ridge, which offered an excellent observational position, and 20 miles south of the ridge was the Qattara Depression, an area of quicksand and salt marsh covering about 7,500 square miles that was impassable to tanks and vehicles. Building new defences from the Depression to the coast and reinforcing those Auchinleck had ordered earlier, the Allied position here could not be flanked without forcing Rommel to take a huge detour south through the Sahara. And the name of this railway station? El Alamein.

The Axis forces reached El Alamein on 30 June, and they were in a confident mood. An encouraging message from Cairo to the U.S. State department had been intercepted and decrypted. It read, "[Colonel Bonner] Fellers [military attaché to the U.S. embassy in Egypt] considers that within the next few days it will be possible for Rommel to arrive at Cairo and Alexandria unless the British can obtain immediately reinforcements of anti-tank and artillery. Fellers considers the situation could be redeemed if hundreds of bombers with anti-tank guns were being flown in. In my opinion, I cannot escape the feeling that the scales might be turned even now by some supreme effort."

Early in the morning on 1 July, Rommel's 90th Light Africa Division

attacked the defences around El Alamein itself, but the assault was halted at about 7.30am. The division tried to move south between El Alamein and the Ruweisat Ridge, but came under such heavy artillery fire that some of its units panicked. The 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions fared little better, being delayed by a sandstorm and aerial attack. It was 9am before the 21st reached its target, the 18th Indian Brigade's positions, by which time it was broad daylight. Attacking an hour later, it eventually overran the Allied position, taking about 1,200 prisoners, but it took all day and cost 18 of its 52 Panzers.

FAILED ASSAULT

In an attempt to repeat their earlier success at Mersa Matruh, Rommel's new Chief of Staff, Colonel Fritz Bayerlein, and Chief of Operations, Lieutenant-Colonel Friedrich-Wilhelm Mellenthin, tried a flanking operation that took them south around El Alamein's defences to attack from the rear. But they had been given incorrect information about Allied positions, and had not taken into account the three South African brigades positioned to the south and south-east, which they hit head-on. British signals

intelligence and air reconnaissance proved effective too, allowing Auchinleck to anticipate Rommel's every move, denying him the element of surprise he had used to such great effect in the past.

The following day, Rommel's forces made little headway in trying to break through the Allied defences. Auchinleck started using mobile brigade groups, introducing movement into his defences and pursuing enemy units after their failed attacks, a change of tactic that later drew praise from Rommel. Concentrated Allied artillery fire was proving highly effective too. As Auchinleck observed, "The boche does not like our shell fire at all." By 3 July, the Afrika Korps was down to 26 operational tanks. His troops exhausted, under constant bombardment from Allied artillery and air strikes, and making little progress, Rommel dug in. He reported to German High Command that his three divisions were down to 1,200-1,500 men each, and without air cover, resupply was proving problematic. Rommel was to bemoan the fact that Italian convoys intended to resupply his frontline forces frequently failed to get through, but placed no blame on the Italian army itself. "The duties of comradeship, for me

"Signals intelligence and air reconnaissance allowed Auchinleck to anticipate Rommel's every move"





*Advance: Bayonets fixed,
Allied troops navigate a
rocky outcrop during the
First Battle of El Alamein,
June 1942*



particularly as their Commander-in-Chief, compel me to state unequivocally that the defeats which the Italian formations suffered at Alamein in early July were not the fault of the Italian soldier," he wrote.

"There is no doubt that the achievement of every Italian unit, especially of the motorised forces, far surpassed anything that the Italian Army had done for 100 years. Many Italian generals and officers won our admiration both as men and as soldiers," he affirmed.

"The cause of the Italian defeat had its roots in the whole Italian military state and system, in their poor armament and in the general lack of interest in the war by many Italians, both officers and statesmen."

He had, of course, underestimated the successes of the British code breakers, which were not well known at the time he was writing.

ITALIAN ASSAULT

Throughout July, Auchinleck went on the offensive. On the 8 July, he sprung an attack on the Tel el Eisa salient. After seven

days, about 2,000 Axis troops had been killed and more than 3,700 taken prisoner. Most importantly of all, Australian troops captured Signals Intercept Company 621, which had until then proved an invaluable source of intelligence for Rommel.

The Italians were attacked in two separate battles at Ruweisat Ridge, destroying three Italian divisions and forcing Rommel to redeploy much of his armour. At Miteirya Ridge (or 'Ruin Ridge', as it became known to its attackers), the Australian 9th Division took more than 700 Italian prisoners before being forced back by a German-Italian counterattack.

OPERATION MANHOOD

Despite considerable successes, progress was not being made. On 26 and 27 July, Auchinleck launched Operation Manhood as a final attempt to shatter the massed Axis forces. During the night Miteirya Ridge was finally taken by the Australian 24th Brigade, and the British 69th Brigade also won all its objectives, but anti-tank units sent in to support were delayed by

minefields and a few got lost in the dark.

When daylight came the Allied forward positions were once again exposed, and they were overrun. His own troops now exhausted, Auchinleck ceased all offensive operations on 31 July, allowing the battered but unbowed Eighth Army to rebuild and resupply. In one of the most significant battles of the war, Rommel had been held, and his aim of taking Egypt and the Suez Canal denied.

In August, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill made a visit to boost the troops' morale. Although he was angered by the loss of Tobruk, he was heartened by the welcome he received.

But if the First Battle of El Alamein had saved the Eighth Army in Egypt, it could not save Field Marshal Auchinleck's job. On 13 August, Churchill replaced him as Commander in Chief, Middle East Command and as Commander of the Eighth Army, with General Sir Harold Alexander and Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Montgomery respectively.



**"The defeats the Italians
suffered were not the fault
of the Italian soldier"**

Field Marshal Rommel

*Troop salute: Winston
Churchill gives his famous
'V for Victory' sign while
being driven past soldiers in
Tel-el-Kebir, August 1942*



THE SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

The first Battle of El Alamein stopped Rommel, but the Axis forces were not defeated. Could Montgomery negotiate the minefields and break the new deadlock? The quarter of a million troops he had assembled came from as far afield as Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Greece and free France. It was a truly international force. They outnumbered Rommel's German and Italian armies by two to one, and were by now well trained and highly motivated. It was a truly awesome force, and it was about to be put to good use in the field.



White flag: A member of a German tank crew surrenders as British infantry rush his tank in El Alamein, October 1942

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TREADING LIGHTLY

The arrival of Montgomery marked a turning point: morale amongst the Allied troops soared, while a sick Rommel was sent back to Germany

On hearing of his appointment as commander of the Eighth Army, Lieutenant-General Montgomery (he wasn't promoted to Field Marshal, the rank by which he's better known, until the Autumn of 1944) is said to have remarked, "After having an easy war, things have now got much more difficult." When advised to cheer up, he replied, "I'm not talking about me, I'm talking about Rommel!" This story is probably apocryphal, but nonetheless it's amusing.

His first action in the North African theatre began at the end of August 1942, when Rommel launched the Battle of Alam el Halfa in an attempt to envelop and destroy the Allied forces before the arrival of the expected reinforcements from America. Thanks to the Ultra code breakers, Monty had a good idea of what Rommel was planning. The British commander deliberately left a gap for the Axis forces to drive into.

The majority of Montgomery's armour and artillery were positioned around the Alam el Halfa Ridge, 20 miles from the front. Use was made of the Allied air superiority too. Rommel was forced back, suffering heavy losses, but Montgomery chose not to pursue him, preferring to save his strength for a new offensive later in the year.

Things were looking bleak for Rommel. His rapid advance had left him with a very long supply line, stretching 1,400 miles east to his base in Tripoli.

Montgomery's main base was in Alexandria, a mere 60 miles west of the front. With the Allies enjoying both air superiority and control of the Mediterranean, only about one in four of Rommel's supply ships got through. Also, while Allied troops were able to take leave in Cairo, there were no such breaks for the Axis soldiers, and with food in short supply, troops frequently fell sick due to undernourishment. As a Lance Corporal with 15th Panzer Division wrote, "Lads come here and after a couple of weeks, they keel over. Most of them get sent back to Germany." To make matters worse, in September 1942, Rommel himself fell ill and was ordered to return home to Germany.

INSPIRATIONAL LEADER

Allied morale was a different story. On taking command, Montgomery made a series of visits to his frontline units, addressing the troops of every major formation held by the Eighth Army and explaining their intended role in the

"You couldn't help but be inspired. You knew he was in command, no doubt about it"

Lieutenant John McGregor

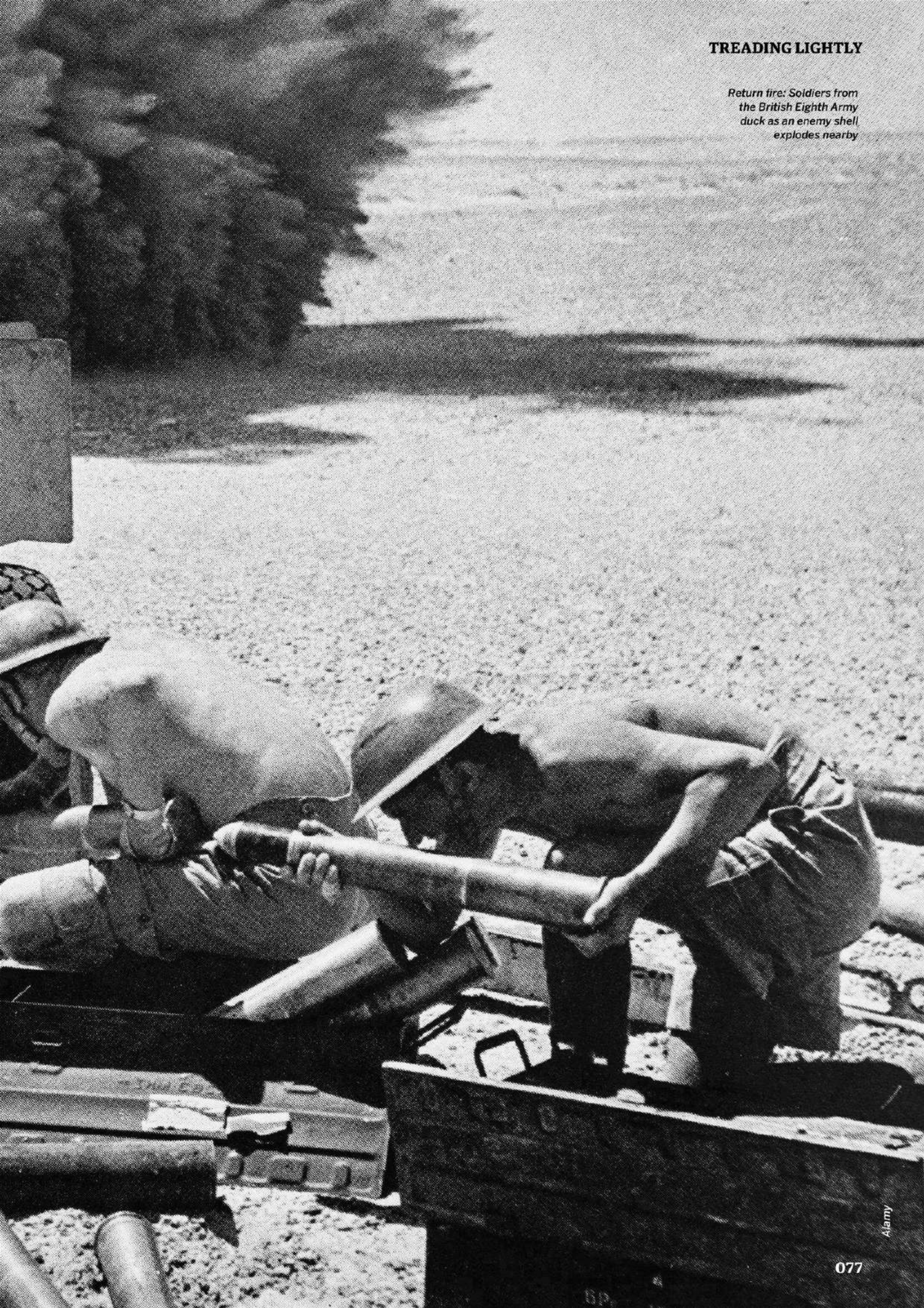


In command: Lieutenant-General Montgomery, wearing his trademark black beret, watches the start of the German retreat from El Alamein





*Return fire: Soldiers from
the British Eighth Army
duck as an enemy shell
explodes nearby*





Panzer pack: German tanks roll into Tunisia, February 1943



forthcoming battle. Monty had never served in the desert before, but he quickly won the seasoned troops over.

According to Lieutenant John McGregor, once of the Black Watch, "Nobody had ever seen an Army commander in person in a field of conflict, and you couldn't help but be inspired. You knew he was in command, no doubt about it, and you didn't tend to drop your gaze when he was looking at you, or look away."

Sergeant Sam Bradshaw of the 7th Armoured Division agrees that Monty was an impressive figure.

"He made people believe this was going to be it. Everything was planned to the last detail."

Within a few days, the atmosphere in the Allied camps had changed completely. Equipment improved too. The Eighth Army was reinforced and re-equipped, with 300 tanks and 30,000 fresh troops. The new Sherman tanks were far superior to the worn out British models and the Grant tanks previously sent over from America, and Spitfires were sent too, much to the delight of the Allied troops who watched them fly overhead. According to Captain Donald Ramsay-Brown, of the 2nd Gurkha Rifles, "The big change came when our Spitfires arrived. With our little radios, we could often pick up the German planes. We heard a German voice say, 'Achtung, Spitfire', and then the Spitfires arrived. We all cheered each time they came over and did their stuff. We were able to walk in the sunlight from then on."

SECRET SUPPLIES

Bradshaw also remembers the build-up. "At last, the things we'd asked for were being delivered," he said. "There were Sherman tanks with 75mm guns. This was another army. The whole desert was covered with vehicles and guns, and they were moving up."

To disguise the build-up, a number of clandestine deceptions were carried out. Codenamed Operation Bertram, throughout September, false ammo, fuel and equipment dumps were created by storing garbage such as empty packing cases under camouflage netting. They were spotted and noted by the enemy, but as no offensive manoeuvres followed, they were eventually taken for granted. In the build-up to the actual attack, the rubbish was replaced by genuine supplies. To disguise the location of the forthcoming attack, dummy tanks were built and genuine tanks were disguised as supply trucks.

By late October, Montgomery was ready. With 200,000 men and more than 1,000 tanks, the Eighth Army had



Plan of attack: Monty discusses plans with senior staff of the Eighth Army



IF GOING

MUCH

FURTHER

PLEASE TAKE

ONE





"Hundreds of guns, spitting fire and snapping like a pack of vicious terriers"

Royal Horse Artillery bombardier

more than double the strength of the Axis forces. It was time to strike a killer blow.

The Second Battle of Alamein got underway at nightfall on 23 October 1942, with Operation Lightfoot, a darkly humorous reference to the anti-tank mines that lay between the Allied and Axis lines. The enemy had lain more than half a million of them in minefields five miles deep, and before the Eighth Army's armoured units could advance, safe pathways had to be cleared. An electronic mine detector had been developed by the Polish, and 500 were shipped to El Alamein and put into immediate service. But there were too few of them, and they frequently proved unreliable. Most of the mine clearance had to be done by hand. Although a man's weight would not be sufficient to trigger an anti-tank mine, the minefields also contained anti-personnel S-mines, nicknamed the 'Bouncing Betty'. They were extremely dangerous, a sapper involved in the clearance recalls in Jonathan Dimpleby's *Destiny in the Desert: The Road to El Alamein*.

"When a foot trod on the detonator there were two distinct explosions. The first flung the mine up in the air, the second was at waist height and it spewed out hundreds of ball bearings horizontally. I felt sorry for the infantry boys. They had to walk across the minefield and take up defensive positions to keep the Jerries off while our lads got to work."

Also 'keeping the Jerries off' was an intense artillery barrage, the biggest British bombardment since the First World War. Some 750 guns opened up, lighting the night sky. "It cuffed, shattered and distorted the senses, and loosened the bowels alarmingly," a bombardier from the Royal Horse Artillery recalled in

Destiny in the Desert. "When I could focus, the faces I first saw looked blanched and then flushed brightly in a kaleidoscope of passionately flickering hues as every line and every detail was etched into relief by the flashes from the muzzles of the guns. Hundreds of guns, almost hub to hub, all bucking and recoiling, spitting fire and snapping like a pack of vicious terriers – it was sheer horror."

DANGEROUS WORK

Naturally, this bombardment had a devastating affect on the enemy. Lieutenant McGregor was one of those who crossed the minefield. "When we finally reached the German lines and went looking for Germans, the only ones we found had already got their hands stretched above their heads."

Cleared lanes were marked through the minefields so the Allied tanks could follow before dawn broke to await the inevitable German counterattack. Sapper Jack Stace of the Royal Engineers was one of the men marking the lanes.

"Out there in no man's land, you felt very, very lonely. Some mines were quite easy to move away. Just use your hands. You just felt your way around it. We'd been trained about what these mines were like, and what they felt like in the dark. If it was a German Teller mine, the fuse is on the top and has a pin attached to it. You push the pin in and unscrew the top off it, and that mine was safe. It's a tense moment, but you know you've got to do it because the infantry people are relying on you to give a clear passage for the heavy equipment to come through."

With the paths cleared and marked, it was time for the next stage in the offensive: sending in the tanks.



TREADING LIGHTLY

Stick to your guns: Dug into their position, a team of British gunners await the enemy at El Alamein



MONTGOMERY AND ROMMEL LOCK HORNS

As the Second Battle of El Alamein drew on, it became a war of attrition. But which side would fight on longest?

When the pathways through the minefields had been cleared, the tanks followed the infantry and engineers into no man's land, driving through the narrow pathways that were supposedly free from mines. The plan was for the tanks to cross the minefields while it was still dark, and throw back the inevitable German counterattack. Although progress was slower than expected, at about 2am the first tanks began their steady advance.

Unfortunately for Montgomery – and for his tank crews – the forward infantry hadn't been as successful in knocking out Rommel's anti-tank guns as the plan required. In fact, only about half the infantry had attained their objectives and neutralised their intended targets.

"We started through the minefields, and got to the second minefield, but the infantry had missed a lot of anti-tank

guns, and we came under intense anti-tank fire," remembers the 7th Armoured Division's Sergeant Sam Bradshaw. "We lost 31 tanks. We got orders to cease action and discontinue, disengage, withdraw. A good anti-tank gunner will take the first tank out, and then the last one, so you can't go forward and you can't go back, and can only go into the minefield and risk being blown up. You'd probably lose a track. Once you lose your track you're a sitting target anyway, because you can't move at all, so you just hope it's not you that's going to be hit. It's a terrible feeling."

Another major problem was that while in the minefields, the tanks threw up a lot of fine sand, creating a veil of dust that reduced visibility. Unable to see where they were going, vehicle congestion was common. Out-of-control tanks, whose drivers had been killed, would also cause difficulties, especially if a lead tank left the cleared pathway and those behind followed it. The Italian Littorio Division's

**"A good anti-tank gunner
will take the first tank out,
and then the last one"**

Sergeant Sam Bradshaw



*Digging for victory:
A British gun crew
makes a trench
in the sand for its
weapon during an
artillery battle*



Battle of Gazala, 26 May – 21 June 1942

British gunners zero in on their next target as a tank smoulders in the distance. Unfolding west of Tobruk, the Battle of Gazala saw a combined German-Italian force under Rommel inflict a crushing defeat on an Allied host containing troops from Britain, the U.S., Free France, India and South Africa. It is still hailed today as Rommel's finest martial triumph.





"It was one of those moments in history when nerves really counted"

Historian Richard Holmes

Captain Dino Contini said, "Some of the tanks continued to advance even after they had been hit and set on fire, with only dead and dying men inside them, like huge, self-propelled funeral pyres, a dead man's foot still pressing down on the accelerator."

STALEMATE

At dawn on 24 October, Allied aerial reconnaissance showed the enemy forces had hardly moved. The attack had failed to achieve its objectives and the Axis line was unbroken.

The Germans suffered a major setback early that morning. Lieutenant-General Georg Stumme was in temporary command while Rommel was on sick leave, and he was driven to the front for an update. Accompanied by Colonel Büchting, a signals officer who wanted to check how quickly the field telephones could be repaired, his car strayed too close to Allied positions and came under fire. Büchting was shot in the head and died instantly. The driver, Corporal Wolf, swerved to escape and didn't notice that Stumme had fallen out. Initially, it was thought he'd been captured, but his body was recovered the next day. He had no visible wounds and was eventually found to have died of a heart attack. He was replaced by General der Panzertruppe Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma, but the next day, Rommel flew back. Shortly before midnight on 25 October, a signal was sent to all units: "I have taken command of the army again – Rommel."

Rommel found the battle was not going well. Even though the Axis line had resisted Montgomery's early attacks, his forces were in poor shape. Casualties from shelling and aerial bombardments were heavy and supplies were low. All his troops were on half rations, and he only had enough fuel for three days. Characteristically, though, he launched a counterattack. When attempts to retake Point 29 – an observation post southwest of Tel el Eisa that had been lost – came to nothing, he abandoned his previous tactic of evenly distributing his armour and concentrated his forces in the northern sector. He was unsuccessful – the Axis forces were thrown back.



MONTGOMERY AND ROMMEL LOCK HORNS

In convoy: Desert dust swirls around these British tanks as they return to their lines after fighting with the Axis forces.



"As the crews bailed out of their tanks, we'd shoot them like rabbits"

Rifleman Horace Suckling

Casualties by this stage were heavy, but Montgomery's superior strength meant he could better afford to lose them. For example, although the Allies lost about 200 tanks in the first two days, this was as many as the Germans had to start with. Monty kept his nerve. As historian Richard Holmes explains, "It was one of those moments in military history when nerve really counted. He knew that his force was larger, better equipped and had more air support. He could afford a battle of attrition, and Rommel couldn't. He took one of the toughest decisions that a general has to face. To accept the loss of men's lives in a slogging match to bring about victory."

UNDER PRESSURE

Rommel's strength was being sapped by the hour. A particularly notable action that did much to whittle away at the Axis' armoured capacity was the defence of 'Outpost Snipe', an oval-shaped depression of about 900 yards long and 400 yards wide, in an otherwise flat and featureless area of the desert. On the night of the 26 and 27 October, the 2nd Battalion of the King's Royal Rifle Brigade, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Victor Buller Turner, was ordered to capture and secure Snipe, and hold it for the 24th Armoured Brigade. They took what they thought was the outpost, but it was actually a similar depression about 900 yards south.

Arriving after dark, they undertook a reconnaissance of the surrounding area. About 1,000 yards north of their position was a mixed German and Italian formation of more than 30 tanks, supported by tank destroyers and infantry units. "They attacked at about 7am," recalls Rifleman Horace Suckling of the Rifle Brigade. "[The anti-tank gunners] were sitting down and doing the work. Without them, we'd have been annihilated. As the crews bailed out of their tanks, whoever

survived, we'd shoot down like rabbits. The shelling during the day and night was out of this world."

The 19 anti-tank guns the 2nd Battalion had brought with them proved very effective. Suckling remembers a successful strike. "I looked at the rear, about 200 yards, and there was a German Mk 3. I said to the lads, 'there's a German tank there. Christ, he's seen us now – we've had it'. And the next thing I heard was this explosion, then I smelt burning rubber. I looked back and this tank had been knocked out."

RELENTLESS ONSLAUGHT

The 2nd Battalion was attacked all day, with wave after wave of enemy tanks and troops bearing down on their position. Support was sadly lacking and several times that night they were bombarded by Allied artillery. But they fought an incredibly heroic rear-guard action, earning Lieutenant-Colonel Turner a VC.

According to his citation, "Lieutenant-Colonel Turner led a Battalion of the Rifle Brigade at night for 4,000 yards through difficult country to their objective, where 40 German prisoners were captured. He then organised the captured position for all-round defence; in this position he and his Battalion were continuously attacked from 5.30am to 7pm, unsupported and so isolated that replenishment of ammunition was impossible owing to the concentration and accuracy of the enemy fire. During this time the Battalion was attacked by not less than 90 German tanks which advanced in successive waves. All of these were repulsed with a loss to the enemy of 35 tanks which were in flames, and not less than 20 more which had been immobilised."

Interestingly, Turner's older brother, Second Lieutenant Alexander B Turner, won a Victoria Cross in the First World War, making them one of only four sets of brothers who have both won a VC.





THE ALLIES ARE VICTORIOUS

With Rommel's forces depleted and his supplies very low, it was time to deliver the knockout blow

Montgomery's battle of attrition was paying off. Although losses were heavy on both sides, his own forces were superior in numbers, and so better able to withstand these losses. Rommel began to despair. On 29 October, he wrote to his wife, "The situation continues [to be] very grave ... at night I lie with my eyes wide open, unable to sleep, for the load that is on my shoulders. In the day I'm dead tired. What will happen if things go wrong here? That is the thought that torments me day and night. I can see no way out if that happens."

But casualties were heavy on both sides. According to an infantryman from the Australian Division, which was involved in heavy fighting in the northern section of the front, the battle resulted in carange. "The first light of dawn [on 1 November] revealed a sight that was none too good for chaps with weak stomachs. Dead and mutilated bodies were to be seen with burnt-out guns, tanks and weapons of all descriptions."

On burying a colleague, he said, "It was difficult to find a little bit of desert to bury him in, the area was so packed."

Montgomery, meanwhile, was planning the next phase of the battle – the breakout. On 30 October, he set out his plans for Operation Supercharge, intended to be a 'staggering blow' from which Rommel's forces would not recover. The plan, as reported in Jonathan Dimbleby's *Destiny in the Desert*, laid down several objectives:

- a) Destroy the enemy armoured forces;
- b) Force the enemy to fight in the open, and thus make him use petrol by constant and continuous movement;
- c) Get astride the enemy supply route, and prevent movement of supply services;
- d) Force the enemy from his forward landing zones and aerodromes;
- e) Bring about the disintegration of the whole enemy army by a combination of all of the above.

In a brilliant bluff, Montgomery convinced Rommel the assault would take place in the northern sector. In fact, he was planning almost the exact opposite. Lieutenant-General Bernard Cyril Freyberg was to lead the assault with his 2nd New Zealand Division, but his men had already suffered terribly during the battle. At Ruweisat Ridge in July, for example, they

"At night I lie with my eyes wide open ... What will happen if things go wrong here?"

Field Marshal Rommel



*Final push: A British
infantry patrol pursues
the retreating German
forces at El Alamein,
November 1942*



had lost 1,405 men in just three days. He told Montgomery, "I will lead any infantry you like, but I will not take my New Zealanders into another assault." Montgomery, who had a great deal of respect for Freyberg as a fighting man (though not for his intelligence), relented and gave him two British infantry and a British armoured brigade to lead.

After a 24-hour delay to allow for the reorganisation of Allied units, Operation Supercharge went ahead at 1.05am on 2 November. Once more the Allied artillery roared, laying down a covering barrage from 360 guns. The infantry advanced. Thanks to the heroic actions of the Australians in the northern section, whose feint had convinced Rommel this was to be the location of the Allied assault, all went well.

"After a while, the Germans started retreating," recalled Sergeant George Green of The Essex Regiment. "Those Germans had been under terrific bombardment and their nerves must've been in a terrible state. The bombardment laid down to support us was tremendous. We could do nothing wrong with that sort of support. We carried on for four miles until we got to our objective."

Behind the infantry came the tanks. "We got through the minefields and broke into the open ground," recalled the 7th Armoured Division's Sergeant Sam Bradshaw. "Then from my point of view, it was purely a question of going forward and attacking. This was going to be tank warfare as we'd done before, and we had a lot better tanks."

"The battle raged. It was a personal thing then. You lost sight of what was happening. It was just you fighting whatever was there."

Again, casualties were heavy, most notably because tanks had to be used against guns. As highlighted in Niall Barr's *Pendulum of War*, Lieutenant-General Freyberg observed, "We all realise that for armour to attack a wall of guns sounds like another Balaclava [a reference to the Charge of the Light Brigade], it is properly an infantry job. But there are no more infantry available. So our armour must do it." But the breakthrough was made.

Realising his position was hopeless, Rommel sent a message to Hitler: "The army's strength was so exhausted after its 10 days of battle that it was not now capable of offering any effective opposition to the enemy's next breakthrough attempt... With our great shortage of vehicles an orderly withdrawal of the non-motorised forces appeared impossible... In these circumstances we had to reckon, at

"The Eighth Army became something you wanted to be in. It meant a lot to people"

Lieutenant John McGregor

the least, with the gradual destruction of the army." The following day, Hitler replied, ordering him to stand his ground. Rommel felt he was being asked to achieve the impossible, so he decided on a compromise. Holding the battlefield with Italian units, he withdrew the Afrika Korps six miles.

But the Eighth Army was in pursuit. Sergeant Bradshaw was slow to celebrate. "I was still a bit sceptical. I'd fought Rommel for a long time, and there were times before when we thought we'd defeated him," he said.

"But when I saw the devastation and the knocked-out tanks, and some of the most modern, supercharged Mk IVs with a 75mm gun on destroyed, and the anti-tank guns, and the dead, and the prisoners, I thought, I can't see that he's going to recover."

END OF THE BEGINNING

Lieutenant John McGregor of the Black Watch was delighted.

"There had been a tremendous build-up of pride in the army. The Eighth Army title became known as something you wanted to be in. It had risen almost from obscurity into this new-born army, so it meant a lot to people."

Churchill was ecstatic. On 10 November, he delivered a speech at the Mansion House. "I have never promised anything but blood, toil, tears and sweat," he said. "Now, we have a new experience. We have victory – a remarkable and definite victory. The bright gleam has caught the helmets of our soldiers, and warmed and cheered all our hearts... This is not the end, it is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

Montgomery now chased Rommel westwards along the North African coast, recapturing the towns, cities and ports that had fallen earlier in the campaign. And in the far west of the North African theatre, there was more exciting news. A British and American fleet had arrived, and was landing troops and equipment in the French colonies of Morocco and Algeria. It was time for Operation Torch.



*Captured troops:
German Afrika Korps
prisoners stop next to
a road sign that points
the way to El Alamein*





THE ALLIES ARE VICTORIOUS

Busted: A German emerges from the bowels of a tank, arms aloft in surrender to the Allied troops rushing to arrest him



AMERICA ARRIVES



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CONSEQUENCES AND RESULTS

Originally known as Operation Gymnast, Operation Torch was the codename for the American and British landings in French North Africa, specifically, Morocco and Algeria. With victory at El Alamein imminent, by taking the western end of the North African coast, the Allies could trap the retreating Rommel in a pincer movement. Montgomery and the victorious Eighth Army would pursue him westwards while the newly landed Anglo-American forces would move east, trapping him.

Arrival: American troops make their way inland after landing at Arzew (or Arzeu), near Oran, Algeria, during Operation Torch, 1942



PLANNING OPERATION TORCH

With Rommel on the run, a second Allied force was to land in North Africa, but Anglo-American negotiations would prove far from easy

The roots of Operation Torch go back to the summer of 1942, when the Russian dictator Joseph Stalin pressed Britain and America to open a new front in the war to take pressure off his own troops following the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. America was keen for a military landing in France, probably in the spring of 1943, when the American troops would be better trained and resourced for such an action. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, mindful of how difficult this would be, suggested the strike on mainland Europe should go through Italy, which he regarded as the continent's 'soft underbelly'.

This would involve a landing in French North Africa and an advance eastwards, trapping Rommel's now-shattered forces and linking up with the Eighth Army, before moving north over the Mediterranean to Sicily and then Italy. The American President, Franklin D Roosevelt, supported Churchill, and a North African landing was planned. But negotiations about specific details proved difficult.

Despite the U.S. Army Chief of Staff General George C Marshall's contention that America should first concentrate on defeating Nazi Germany in Europe and then tackle the menace of Japan in the Far East, competing claims for limited resources led Washington to scale back the planned deployment in North Africa.

Churchill, who had missed much of these negotiations while away in the Middle East and Moscow, began to fear that America was losing interest in the whole operation.

As the British Director of Military Operations Major-General John Kennedy wrote in late August – at around the time when Churchill put Montgomery in command of the Eighth Army, prior to the second Battle of El Alamein – "The whole operation is at best extremely hazardous. The only hope of success is if we and the Americans put our whole effort into it. It is almost incredible that their share of the operations should be so weak and half-hearted."

PUPPET LEADERSHIP

The territories in which the landings were to take place were held by the collaborationist French Vichy Government, a regime that covered the parts of France that weren't occupied by the Germans, under the puppet leadership of Marshal Philippe Pétain.

There were around 125,000 soldiers in the Vichy French-held North African territories, along with coastal artillery, 210 tanks (most of which were out of date) and around 500 aircraft. At the port of Casablanca, located in western Morocco, there were around ten warships and 11 submarines.

Little resistance was anticipated from these French forces. Until the German invasion in 1940, France had been an ally of America and Britain. Surely they would prove reluctant to fight and see

the landings as a friendly invasion? With this in mind, the landing American troops were ordered not to fire unless they first came under attack. The French naval forces could pose a problem, though.

In July 1940, the British had attacked a French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir, Algeria, to prevent it falling into German hands. A battleship was sunk, five other ships damaged and 1,297 French servicemen killed. Would they bear a grudge? As historian Andrew Roberts put it, "The Stars and Stripes might be welcomed in North Africa, whereas the Union Jack would be fired upon."

As a result, Roosevelt suggested the initial landings should be carried out by an exclusively American force, though when this caused consternation on the British side, he decided to compromise and land alongside the British after all.

Three landing sites were chosen for Operation Torch: Casablanca, Oran and Algiers. The Western Task Force, under the command of Major-General George Patton, would target Casablanca in French Morocco. A total of 35,000 troops were to land – not at Casablanca itself, which was thought too risky, but at Safi, Fedala and Mehdiya, before moving to the famous town.

At Oran, on the north coast of Algeria, Major-General Lloyd Fredendall would land the Central Task Force of 18,500

"The whole operation is at best extremely hazardous"

Major-General John Kennedy

US involvement: American troops wait onboard a landing craft going in to land at Oran, North Africa, during Operation Torch, November 1942



troops. Oran was a large port with several airfields nearby and was within flying range of the Allied base at Gibraltar. Its capture would allow a build-up of Allied air power.

Finally, the 20,000 troops of the Eastern Task Force would land at Algiers, commanded by General Charles W Ryder. Algiers was another key port the Allies were keen to take. A landing at Tunis, Tunisia, was ruled out as it was too close to Axis airfields in Sicily and Sardinia, and an alternative site on the Algerian side of the Tunisian boarder was discounted due to lack of resources. Instead, it was decided the troops landing near Casablanca, Oran and Algiers would neutralise any threat from the Vichy French as rapidly as possible then make a rapid advance east to Tunisia.

AMPHIBIOUS LANDINGS

In overall command was America's General Dwight D Eisenhower. Britain's Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham would command the Expeditionary Force, with his deputy, Vice-Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, taking charge of the tricky amphibious landings.

The American consul in Algiers, Robert Daniel Murphy, entered into talks with the Vichy French. Several senior officers, including General Charles Mast, the French Commander-in-Chief in Algiers, were willing to support the Anglo-American invasion force but requested a meeting with a senior Allied officer.

In an action codenamed Operation Flagpole, Major General Mark W Clark was dispatched to Algeria on the HMS Seraph, a British submarine posing as an American vessel. He found that although the French navy was opposed to U.S. involvement in North Africa, the army and air force supported it. Clark had the co-operation of French army officer Général Henri Giraud, and was promoted to Lieutenant-General.

"Although the French navy was opposed to U.S. involvement in North Africa, the army and airforce supported it"



PLANNING OPERATION TORCH

Land in view: American troops on the deck of a transport ship steaming into Algiers harbour during Operation Torch, 1942







LANDINGS AT CASABLANCA, ALGIERS AND ORAN



The troops land in French North Africa, but will the Vichy forces consider them friends or foes?

The Operation Torch landings of November 1942 were the first major amphibious landings of World War II, and the first co-operative venture between the Americans and the British. The troops were well trained, having been practising amphibious landings since 1940. Most were British and American, but their strength was bolstered by Canadian, Dutch and free French soldiers. The first phase of the operation saw 110 troop ships carry 107,000 troops, escorted by over 200 warships. Secrecy had been tight. Even when German and Italian intelligence became aware of the naval build-up, they had no idea of its purpose or where it was due to land.

Indeed, it was only when at sea that the troops themselves were told where they were going and why. As historian David Isby explains, "Once at sea, the men were told their destination was French North Africa, and they were hoping to land as liberators to the French and not as adversaries."

ARMADA ASSEMBLE

The first convoy left from Glasgow on 2 October. The troop ships started their journeys between 22 October and 1 November, with the entire armada assembling in Gibraltar by 4 November. The following day it passed through the Straits of Gibraltar in just 33 hours. On 8

November, the ships assembled at pre-arranged locations near the landing sites, guided by infra-red signal beams from Royal Navy submarines. The landings were on.

Around Casablanca, the Western Task Force landed in three places as planned. Operation Blackstone saw the U.S. 47th Infantry Regiment land at Safi, the furthest west of all the landing zones. Arriving before daybreak, the troops – commanded by General Ernest N Harmon – landed without covering fire in the hope that the Vichy French forces wouldn't fire on them. It was not to be. Coastal batteries opened fire, which was returned by the fleet, and snipers pinned the first wave of troops on the beaches for a while. It seemed Général Giraud

**"For a moment
I felt great
bitterness in
my soul as I saw
my comrades
scattered all
around"**

*Anonymous,
Foreign Legion*

"He issued an order that the Corps at least were to look like soldiers..."

Colonel Charles Dunphie on Patton

had made promises of co-operation he couldn't keep.

The landing was supported by air raids too. A member of the Foreign Legion manning a Vichy battery recalls his position being bombed by American planes in Sir Max Hastings's *All Hell Let Loose*: "In five minutes it was all over," he said. "I crept out of the ditch where I had flung myself when the first bomb fell. Out of 30 men and one officer, 15 men and the officer were dead; ten more were wounded. The two guns were out of commission and two trucks were on fire. For a moment I felt great bitterness in my soul as I saw my comrades scattered all around. Ever since the fall of France, we had dreamed of deliverance, but we did not want it that way." The defenders were soon overwhelmed, with Safi surrendering that afternoon. By 10 November, General Harmon was in control of the town and ready to move to Casablanca.

The majority of the Western Task Force's infantry landed at Fedala, a small fishing village 12 miles north of Casablanca, in Operation Brushwood. Major-General Jonathan W Anderson commanded several infantry regiments here. Further east, Operation Goalpost saw General Lucian Truscott engaged in a fierce fight for the towns of Mehdiya and Port Lyautey, which weren't captured until the 11 November.

Major-General George Patton, the overall commander of the Western Task Force, had a reputation as a gung-ho warrior. His Assistant Chief of Staff Colonel Charles Dunphie recalls an incident during the post-Alamein North African campaign in Max Arthur's *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War*.

"He issued an order that the Corps at least were to look like soldiers, and everyone must wear a steel helmet and none of these knitted caps any longer," he said. "I was driving him in a jeep when we passed an officer by the side of the road in a knitted cap, and Patton shouted 'STOP!' He got out, took him by the neck and shook him like a rabbit. He took his cap off, threw it on the ground and fined him ten cents for the Red Cross. I said, 'steady, General. Wasn't that a bit rough?' And he said, 'It'll be all round the Corps by

tonight, and you'll never see one of those God-damned caps again.' And I must say, I never did."

But he had a softer side too. Dunphie recalls another incident later in the campaign. "We were moving forward and got stuck. [Patton] sent General Bradley, who was second in command of the Corps, and myself forward with his ADC, a boy called Janssen, of whom he was very fond. We were to see the Divisional Commander and find out what was holding him up. Rather stupidly, I think, our jeeps were parked together, and three Junkers came over, opened their bomb doors and let out these anti-personnel bombs, which landed right among us. It killed Janssen and wounded me, but General Bradley was luckily not hit. When I was in hospital, Patton came round to talk to me about Janssen, so I told him. He sat down on the bed and burst into tears."

The Central Task Force landed on two beaches west of Oran, and one to its east. After delays caused by the appearance of a French convoy, the forces landed with some difficulty due to shallow waters. A lesson was learned. Future amphibious landings such as Overlord were preceded by reconnaissance landings to assess local conditions. Vichy French ships broke out of the harbour and attacked the fleet, but all were sunk or grounded. The town was taken by 9 November.

The Eastern Task Force's landing was preceded by a coup in which 400 members of the French Resistance captured key targets in the town of Algiers and surrounded the home of General Alphonse Juin, the most senior French officer in North Africa.

Major-General Charles W Ryder commanded the landings at three beaches around Algiers, almost without incident, and the town was taken by 6pm on 8 November. On the following day, the Eastern Task Force was renamed the British 1st Army, and command was given to Lieutenant-General Kenneth Anderson. He ordered his troops to press east and take the key ports of Bougie, Philippeville and Bône and the airfield at Djedjelli, all in eastern Algeria near the Tunisian border. The battle for control of Tunisia was about to begin.



Tuning in: An American infantry unit with a radio station camp near a cane field on the Tunisian front, Fedala, November 1942



AFTER TORCH: CONSEQUENCES AND RESULTS

With Rommel cornered, could the North African Campaign be drawing to a close?

After his triumph at El Alamein, Montgomery pursued the retreating Axis forces west through Egypt and Libya. Tobruk was recaptured on 13 November, with the Eighth Army liberating Benghazi a week later. At the other end of North Africa, Eisenhower's American and British force was pressing east from Algeria. Rommel had lived to fight another day after El Alamein, but he was now retreating towards Tunisia.

The civilians liberated by the advancing Eighth Army were delighted. As Sir Max Hastings reports in *All Hell Let Loose*, land girl Muriel Green wrote on 11 November, "Suddenly realised the news has become exciting. I'd grown so tired of advances and withdrawals in Egypt for the past few years I did not realise this one was anything to jump about. It is marvellous the Americans striking the other side [of Africa], I really think things are beginning to happen and that victory is on the way."

The beleaguered Soviet troops fighting on the Eastern Front welcomed the news too. As Captain Nikolai Belov wrote, "Good news came today: the Americans and English are giving the Germans a real thrashing. Though Africa is very far, now it feels so close."

FRENCH DEAL

On 10 November, just two days after the initial landings, Eisenhower and Churchill had made a deal with Admiral François Darlan, the most senior French officer in North Africa. He was recognised as French High Commissioner in North Africa (a role he'd awarded himself), and in return, he ordered all Vichy French forces to stop fighting the Allies and instead, co-operate. And unlike General Giraud, Admiral Darlan did have the authority to make such a deal. Hitler was furious.

After the German invasion of France, a condition of the armistice was that the southern section of France would remain free of German occupation; this

"Had Hitler sent fresh troops into a trap or could this new army snatch victory from the jaws of defeat?"



V for victory: Crowds in Algiers cheer the Allies and jeer Italian prisoners being transported through the town



defined Vichy France, which was named after the town that housed its nominally independent government.

Another condition of the armistice was that Vichy French forces stationed elsewhere in the world should resist the Allies. But after Darlan's agreement, Hitler immediately ordered the German army to occupy the whole of France. Darlan, meanwhile, was not to enjoy his new position for long. On Christmas Eve 1942, he was assassinated by a young French monarchist who was also a passionate anti-fascist, and considered Darlan a collaborator.

WARSHIPS BURNED

The 58 warships of the French fleet at Toulon, on the south coast of France, had remained under control of the Vichy Government under terms of the armistice. It now became a German target. Germany was running short of ships, so the fleet was a major prize, its capture even being given a codename: Operation Lila.

The 7th Panzer Division, bolstered by units from other divisions, was to attack the port from the east, while German ships laid mines and patrolled the seas to deter any French vessels from trying to escape. The attack came as a surprise, but although capturing key French naval officers was a priority, Admiral Jean de Laborde of the French Navy managed to transmit an order to scuttle the ships before they could be captured.

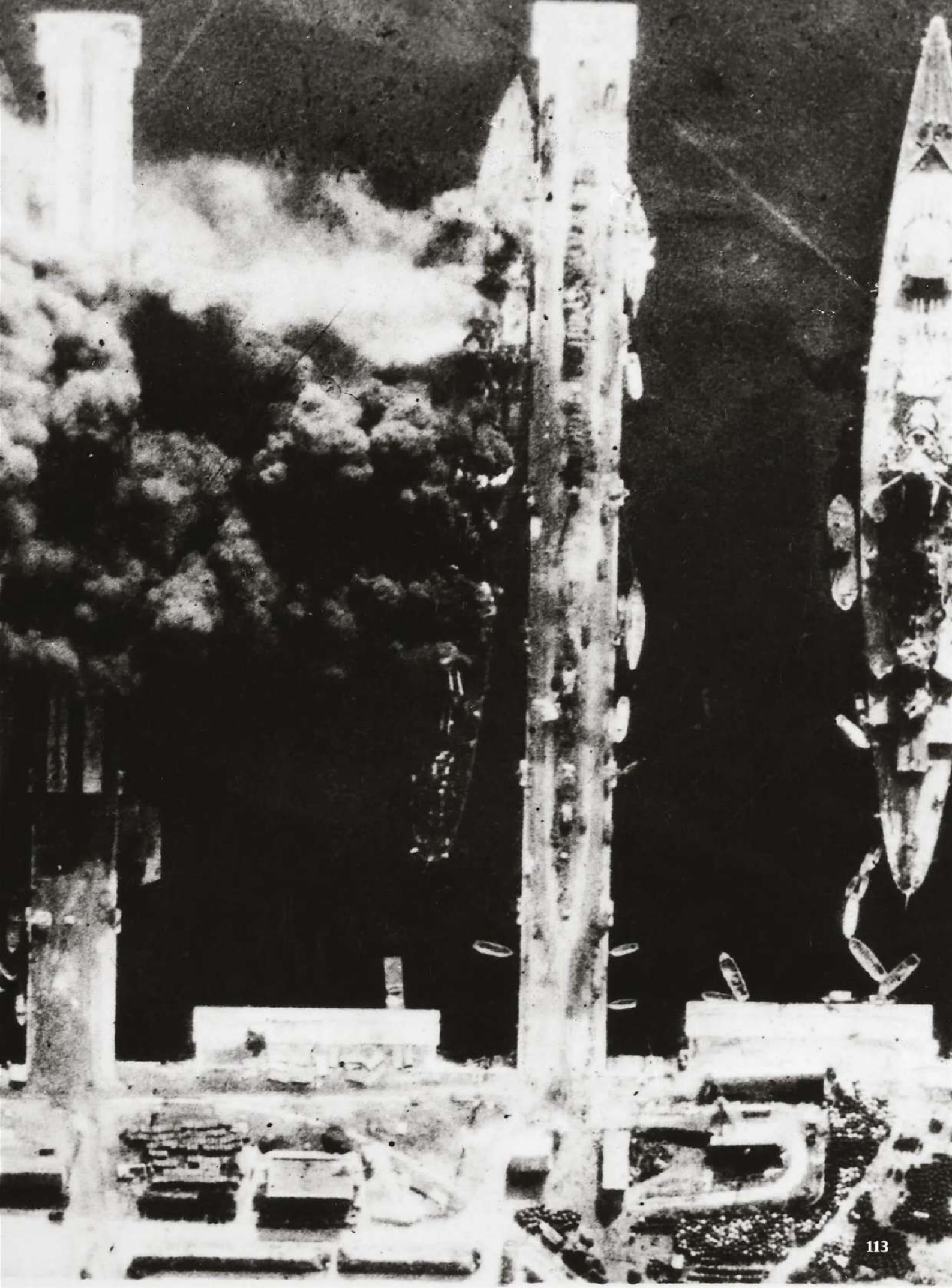
The order was obeyed. A total of 77 French vessels were scuttled, including three battleships, seven cruisers, 15 destroyers and 12 submarines. Three more submarines managed to put to sea and evade the German navy, joining the Allies in Algiers. The Germans did manage to capture 39 smaller vessels, but most had been sabotaged before they could seize them.

Hitler also landed a significant new German force in Tunisia, immediately moving in 17,000 troops and supporting armour from Italy by air and sea. He even withdrew 400 aircraft from the eastern front and moved them to Tunisia, going some way to ease the pressure on the hard-pressed Red Army. Had Hitler sent fresh troops into a trap or could this new German army snatch victory from the jaws of defeat? Rommel appeared to think not.

In late November, he urged Hitler to abandon the North African theatre, insisting that "no improvement in the shipping situation could now be expected". Hitler declined, claiming that retaining a major bridgehead was a necessity. It seemed the North African campaign was not yet over.

Burning boats: The scuttled French fleet burns in the port of Toulon, half swallowed by a pall of thick black smoke





Show of strength: German trucks and military vehicles drive through the Tunisian capital, Tunis



THE RACE TO TUNISIA

As 1942 drew to a close, both the Axis and the Allied forces closed in on Tunisia. But would it prove an Allied bridgehead into Italy, or the source of an Axis counterattack?

After the Operation Torch landings, the Eastern Task Force – renamed the British 1st Army – pressed east to Tunisia.

Ahead of the advancing army, the 3rd Parachute Battalion was dropped onto the airfield at Bône, and the nearby port was captured by commandos.

On 15 November, advanced guards of the 36th Brigade reached Tabarka, on the north coast of Tunisia, just inside the Algerian border. On the same day the Eighth Army, advancing from the other direction, captured Derna in Libya, and 300 paratroopers from the second battalion of the American 509th Parachute Regiment landed on the airfield at Youks-les-Bains, on the Algerian side of the border, where they met up with a poorly equipped but friendly unit from the French Army. Moving east, two days later they took the airfield at Gafsa, in central Tunisia. The main landing force had yet to arrive, but the Allies were already making their presence felt.

AERIAL ADVANTAGE

Two Allied columns advanced on Tunisia, with one heading for Djebel Abiod and the other for Béja. The 1st Army's initial contact with the enemy occurred on 17 November, when advance units from the Djebel Abiod column ran into an Axis force consisting of 17 tanks, 400 paratroopers and self-propelled guns. Despite knocking out 11 tanks, after nine days of brutal fighting they were forced to withdraw.

More German reinforcements were being sent into Tunisia. Between 12 November and the end of the month,

more than 15,000 men, many tanks and a huge tonnage of supplies would be airlifted via Tunis. Indeed, because of its proximity to Axis airfields and the long distances Allied aircraft had to fly, the Luftwaffe enjoyed aerial superiority in Tunisia. This was put to good use, with enemy planes strafing and bombing Allied columns as they advanced towards the new battle zone.

The German reinforcements were under the command of General Walther Nehring, who had arrived on 17 November. Unable to fight against such a large and fresh deployment, France's senior military commander in Tunisia, Major-General Georges Barré, declared his neutrality and withdrew his forces to the hills. He set up a defensive line there, and declared anyone who attempted to cross it would be shot.

On 19 November, General Nehring demanded the French withdraw from Medjez el Bab in northern Tunisia, allowing his units to cross the bridge there. Barré refused. The French repulsed two German attacks but, lacking armour, they were forced to pull back.

Nehring then organised forced labour groups to build fortifications. Leaders of the Jewish community were expected to recruit Jewish labourers to do the work without pay, even having to provide their

own food and equipment. The Italians objected, and insisted that Jewish people with Italian citizenship be exempt. At the time, there were about 85,000 Jewish people living in Tunisia, about 5,000 of whom were Italian citizens. As reported in Martin Gilbert's *The Second World War: A Complete History* (Phoenix, 1989) Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diary in December, "The Italians are extremely lax in their treatment of the Jews. They protect Italian Jews both in Tunis and in occupied France and won't permit their being drafted for work or compelled to wear the Star of David."

Conditions in the 30 or so labour camps were terrible. Those who were not eligible for work were 'fined' on the basis that 'international Jewry' was responsible for the bombing raids on Tunis. Somewhere in the region of 50 million francs was confiscated in this way.

Supplies were becoming a problem for the Allies. They now had very long supply lines while the enemy's were relatively short, a reversal of the situation Auchinleck and then Montgomery benefited from when they faced Rommel at El Alamein, earlier in the year.

General Lucian Truscott, who commanded the elements of the Western Task Force that landed at Mehdia and

"Because of its proximity to Axis airfields, the Luftwaffe enjoyed aerial superiority"

Port Lyautey in Morocco, remembers it very well.

"Supply was the absorbing problem in every headquarters in North Africa," he later wrote. "There was still a dearth of service troops and transportation. Few units in North Africa yet had their full scale of motor transportation. The single rail line running eastward from Oran and Algiers had suffered from neglect, and there was a shortage of locomotives and rolling stock.

"The two principal roads east from Algiers, one along the coast and the other the principal highway further inland, although paved, were not in good repair and both traversed rugged, mountainous terrain with steep grades and turns, and many bridges."

But on 25 November 1942, Lieutenant-General Kenneth Anderson's British 1st Army was ready to make its move. In a three-pronged attack, the 36th Infantry Brigade Group in the north was to advance from Djebel Abiod, take Djelfa and press on to Mateur. In the centre were two infantry brigade groups from 78th Infantry Division, an armoured regimental group from 6th Armoured Division and artillery support.

Known as Blade Force and commanded by Colonel Richard Hull, this group would take minor roads through the mountains and link up with the southern attack force, the British 11th Infantry Brigade, which was to take Medjez el Bab, and press forward to Tebourba. Less than 25 miles from Tunis, the Tunisian capital would by then be within reach.

After considerable initial successes, Blade Force ran into a panzer group and was stopped. The British 11th Infantry

in the south managed to surround the German Koch Battle Group, causing Nehring to use every available aircraft to halt the Allied offensive. He failed, and as the Allies passed Medjez el Bab, he had to withdraw and fortify Djedeida, just 15 miles from Tunis.

In the north, the 36th Infantry Brigade advanced on Mateur, forcing Nehring to rearrange his defences. From these stronger positions, an Axis counterattack at the end of November halted the Allied advance. The strike for Tunis had fallen 19 miles short.

FIGHT FOR LONGSTOP

Axis counterattacks pushed back the Allied lines until, by 10 December, they were just east of Medjez el Bab. But it wasn't enough to save Nehring's command. Kesselring, in overall command of the Axis forces in Tunisia, had lost faith in him and he was replaced by Colonel-General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim.

With the fighting stalled, both sides used the time to regroup and build their strength. By late December, there was a total of 54,000 British, 73,800 American and 7,000 French troops in Tunisia, facing about 125,000 combat and 70,000 service troops, who were mostly Italian. It was time for another assault.

On 22 December, a combined American and British group fought their way onto Longstop Hill, an important piece of high ground that overlooked a significant route into Tunis. However, after initial successes, the Germans regained the hill, forcing the Allies – who were low on ammunition – to pull back to their previous line on Boxing Day. The last Allied attack of 1942 had failed, at a cost of 400 dead or wounded.

"Supply was the absorbing problem in every headquarters in North Africa. There was a dearth of service troops and transportation"

General Lucian Truscott







Opening salvo: A Daimler armoured car opens fire in the early morning gloom at the start of the battle for Tripoli

A DIFFICULT CAMPAIGN

Taking the battle to Tunisia posed problems for the Allies, while the German high command was losing faith in Rommel

Tunisia presented significant difficulties for the Allies, and definite advantages for the defending enemy.

Sandwiched between Algeria to the west and Libya to the east, the country's northern and much of its eastern boundary was on the Mediterranean. It was just a short distance north across the sea to Italy, while Malta was about halfway between Tunisia and Sicily.

This gave the Axis forces a logistical advantage. As mentioned earlier, in a reversal of the situation at El Alamein, the Axis forces now had a very short supply route (south from Italy), but both Allied armies had to haul their supplies considerable distances.

Another advantage for Rommel was the terrain. Unlike much of the featureless, open North African desert, Tunisia had significant mountain ranges. Much of the northern part of its border with Algeria crossed the Atlas Mountains, making it much easier to defend. To the south was the Matmata Hills, which although not as high, also offered good defensive opportunities.

The route into Tunisia through Libya between these two areas of high ground was already fortified. Between 1936 and 1940, the French had built the Mareth Line, a series of fortifications between the towns of Medenine and Gabès that was 12 miles wide and 19 miles deep. Loosely based on the Maginot Line, the famous French fortification along her border with Germany, it was designed to prevent an Italian invasion through Libya. In fact, it was frequently referred to as the 'desert Maginot Line'.

ROMMEL'S FEARS

Rommel, who by now had managed

to retreat all the way along the North African coast from Egypt and almost into Tunisia, had mixed feelings about the strength of these fortifications.

On his first inspection, on 26 January 1943, he found the French bunkers to be old, out of date and insufficient to protect against artillery attacks. But the southern bunkers offered good defences against tanks, and there was the steep-sided Wadi Zigzaou in the centre, a natural ditch that was virtually impassable to armour. Tanks could, however, be driven across the salt marshes to the north, and worse still, the entire installation could be outflanked in the south.

He suggested a stand should be made at Gabès further to the west instead but was overruled by his high command, which wanted to protect Germany's Tunisian territory so a force could be built up ready for a counterattack.

But both the German and Italian high commands, and Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, overall commander of German forces in Italy, were losing faith in Rommel. Despite the incredible skill he showed in withdrawing and retreating with minimal casualties after El Alamein, despite facing an overwhelmingly superior enemy – a feat that has been described as "one of the most brilliant retreats in the history of warfare" – they felt he disobeyed Hitler's and Mussolini's orders by pulling back and was no longer as able a commander. They ordered his recall on health grounds and for him to be replaced by General Giovanni Messe, previously commander of Italian forces in the USSR. He hated the Germans.

Rommel slid into a depression. He felt – and not without cause – that he was being made a scapegoat for the failure of others, most notably Kesselring's blind optimism (he was nicknamed 'Smiling Albert' by the Allies) and the German

high command's failure to grasp the situation in North Africa.

Although he appreciated the reinforcements sent from Italy, he felt that if they'd arrived earlier in the campaign he could have advanced into Egypt and won, instead of being held at El Alamein. Sending in extra troops, armour and equipment at this stage was merely delaying the inevitable. He was also concerned for his men, whom he felt had been thrown to the wolves. "They are very dear to me," he wrote.

The depth of Rommel's despair is illustrated in a letter to his wife on 28 December. "Dearest Lu," he wrote, "Our fate is gradually working itself out. Supplies have been very short and it would need a miracle for us to hold on much longer. What is to happen now lies in God's hands. We'll go on fighting as long as it's at all possible. I saw this coming when we were last together and discussed the most important things with you."

BRITISH ADVANCE

Although he was allowed to choose when to hand over to his successor, Rommel asked for Messe to be sent to North Africa as soon as possible so he could brief him on the situation. The Italian arrived on 2 February, but his bravado and optimism convinced the Desert Fox that he shouldn't hand over command until the situation was more stable.

By this time, the British Eighth Army had already captured Tripoli, which had fallen on 23 January. Montgomery was now only a little over 250 miles from the Tunisian border and had secured an important port for resupply. Rommel's brilliant retreat, however, had allowed his forces to escape into Tunisia, arriving south of the Mareth Line on 4 February. The battle was on.

THE BATTLES OF SIDI BOU ZID AND KASSERINE PASS

The campaign was going the way the Allies wanted, but twin defeats showed the enemy was not to be underestimated

The achievements of Lieutenant-General Anderson, Commander of the British 1st Army, greatly impressed General Eisenhower. "Troops and commanders were not experienced," he wrote, "but the boldness, courage and stamina of General Anderson's forces could not have been exceeded by the most battle-wise veterans."

"Physical conditions were almost unendurable. The mud deepened daily, confining all operations to the roads, long stretches of which practically disintegrated. Winter cold was already descending on the Tunisian highlands. The bringing up of supplies and ammunition was a Herculean task. In spite of all this, and in spite of Anderson's lack of strength – his whole force numbered only about three brigades of infantry and a brigade of obsolescent tanks – he pushed on."

There was a new twist on the war as a whole when British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and American President Franklin D Roosevelt met in Casablanca to plan the next stage of the battle. After securing victory in North Africa, the Allies would invade Sicily and then Italy, with a cross-channel landing in France planned for 1944.

Perhaps more importantly, though, it was decided that the war would be a fight to the bitter end. On 20 January, Churchill said it was "the firm intention of the United States and the British Empire

to continue the war relentlessly until we have brought about the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan".

There were to be no terms – only unconditional surrender. Interestingly, Churchill failed to mention Italy, wisely believing this would bolster pro-Allied and anti-Mussolini opinion among its weary citizens.

Naturally, Germany made the most out of the statement in terms of propaganda. As General Hasso von Manteuffel put it, "The Allied demand for unconditional surrender and the persistent claim by the Allies that Germany must be destroyed ... reinforced the will of the German people to fight to the bitter end. The Allies offered no alternative."

Also in January, David Stirling, founder of the SAS, was captured by Rommel's forces making their way west into Tunisia. As the Desert Fox himself put it, "A number of our AA gunners succeeded in surprising a British column of the Long Range Desert Group in Tunisia and captured the commander of 1st

**"They poured
around us,
charging forward.
They were
everywhere"**

Reporter Ernie Pyle

SAS Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel David Stirling. Insufficiently guarded, he managed to escape and made his way to some Arabs, to whom he offered a reward if they could get him back to the British lines. But his bid must have been too small, for the Arabs, with their usual eye to business, offered him to us for 11 pounds of tea – a bargain that we soon clinched." Sterling was eventually sent to Colditz Castle, where he spent the rest of the war.

KEY TARGET

On 30 January, in northwestern Tunisia, the newly arrived Axis army faced the Allies who had landed during Operation Torch. Germany's newly appointed Commander-in-Chief of Army Group Africa, Colonel-General von Arnim, ran into French forces near the strategic mountain pass of Faïd. He soon overran the under-equipped French, who, despite mounting several counterattacks, were thrown back.

Colonel-General von Arnim's next target was Sidi Bou Zid. On 14 February, Lieutenant-General Heinz Ziegler led a force of approximately 140 tanks, drawn from 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions, west from the Faïd Pass, into the Atlas Mountains. Under the cover of a sandstorm, 10th Panzer Division struck at dawn.

Undercover operation: Men of the Long Range Desert Group (later the SAS) returning from a three-month trip behind enemy lines

Who dares wins: the first SAS

The lethal special unit that would come to be known as the SAS (Special Air Service) was the brainchild of David Stirling, a British Army officer regarded by Montgomery as "mad, quite mad". Seeing how effective a small commando unit could be behind enemy lines, Stirling founded the unit in 1941. While its first mission ended in tragedy, with a third of the group either killed or captured, its second endeavour was a triumph. Hitting three airfields in Libya, the unit blew up 60 aircraft. Other missions included sabotaging supply depots, transport and communication links and enemy vehicles. A devastating force, the SAS continues to this day to conduct daring operations around the world.

Reporter Ernie Pyle remembers it well. "They poured around us, charging forward," he said. "They weren't close together – probably a couple of hundred yards apart. There weren't lines or any specific formation."

The fighting raged throughout the morning, with about 20 German tanks being put out of action. An American counterattack the following day failed to halt the German advance, and they were forced to withdraw. The U.S. II Corps had suffered greatly, losing 2,546 troops (killed, wounded and missing), 103 tanks, 280 vehicles, 18 field guns, three anti-tank guns and one anti-aircraft battery.

The U.S. II Corps then retreated west to the Kasserine Pass, an important thoroughfare through the Atlas Mountains and the gateway to Algeria. After an initial strike by a German reconnaissance unit failed to achieve a breakthrough, on 19 February Rommel arrived on the battlefield to assess the situation. Ordering the Afrika Korps Assault Group from Fériana and adding the 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions to his German-Italian Panzer Army, he took command himself.

ROCKET ATTACKS

The American troops proved brave but inexperienced, and although well equipped, they were inadequately armed to repel a tank attack. Their positions within the pass were quickly overrun. A major contributory factor was the introduction of the German Nebelwerfer rocket launchers, which were used for the first time in North Africa, and took a great toll on American infantry.

On 21 February, the Axis force was split into two groups, with Rommel himself leading the 10th Panzer Division as it advanced towards Thala, and a smaller, German-Italian force moving further west to Haïdra, near the Algerian border. The Desert Fox was by now back in favour. Kesselring had offered him command of the Army Group in Africa, but aware that Hitler wanted Colonel-General von Arnim for that post, he declined.

To protect a significant supply dump at Haïdra, the Allies brought in reinforcements. On 22 February, experienced British infantry arrived at the front, supported by artillery. The Axis forces were bombarded, but although they lost many tanks, their line held. In the pre-dawn darkness of the following day, though, Rommel withdrew east – not because he'd been thrown back by an

Allied retaliatory strike, but to prevent an attack from the British Eighth Army, advancing from Libya.

His retreat allowed the Allies to reoccupy the Kasserine Pass but it was still a major defeat. More than 10,000 troops were lost, compared to Axis losses of about 2,000, and huge stocks of equipment were abandoned as the Americans were forced back.

As historian Professor Charles R Anderson observed, "In a final insult, the disastrous series of defeats was ended not by stiffening American resolve but by a shift in Axis priorities."

According to historian Sir Max Hastings, "The Americans learned lessons often forced upon the British before them: about the quality of enemy armour, the speed of the Germans' actions and reactions, the ruthlessness with which they pressed every advantage."

Drew Middleton, military correspondent for the *New York Times*, agreed: "It brought the troops face to face with the fact that this was going to be a long war – and a tough one – and that the Germans were very good. Armies never learn from other armies, they have to learn by themselves, and a lot of the tactics that we used – disastrously – at Kasserine were those that the British had used equally disastrously two years before in the western desert, and then discarded."

As RAF Corporal Peter Baxter wrote in his diary, "I think the Americans merely lack training in battle conditions, and maybe aren't too sure what they're supposed to be fighting the Germans for." were just everywhere. They covered the desert to the right and left, ahead and behind as far as we could see, trailing their eager dust tails behind. It was almost as though some official starter had fired his blank pistol. The battle was on."

The battle was contested by more than 200 tanks in total, but American armour was spread too thinly, allowing the panzers to break their lines fairly quickly. The German advance was fast. According to the official British summary for the day, "In their northern thrust the Germans met with initial success. By 0715 hours, 20 of their tanks had reached a point five miles northeast of Sidi Bou Zid while the village itself was dive-bombed. By noon 50 enemy tanks with infantry and artillery had, in spite of a small U.S. counterattack, reached the northwest slopes of Djebel Lessouda and were advancing southwest to the Faïd-Sbeitla road."

**"I think the Americans
aren't too sure what
they're fighting for"**

Corporal Peter Baxter



Search for booby traps: U.S. soldiers examine an Italian tank captured during a successful counterattack at the Kasserine Pass



THE ALLIES PREVAIL

With Rommel and the Afrika Korps trapped between two armies, the end seemed inevitable

By February 1943, both the Allied and Axis commands were reorganised. On 20 February, General Sir Harold Alexander arrived to take up a new role as Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Allied forces in French North Africa, under General Dwight D Eisenhower. He would command the new 18th Army Group headquarters, from where the First and Eighth Armies' operations would be co-ordinated. His stated plan of action was to advance the Eighth north of Gabès, using the First in support. Both armies would capture crucial airfields, from where Allied air operations could be launched, and then the Axis forces in Tunisia would be surrounded and neutralised. He planned to achieve this by 30 April.

The Axis forces also created a combined command, Army Group Africa. At Kesselring's insistence, Rommel was put in charge. Asking his two army commanders, Colonel-General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim and General Giovanni Messe for their assessment of the situation, he found both thought it was untenable. They were tasked with defending a front almost 400 miles long with 120,000 troops and 150 Panzers against 210,000 Allied soldiers and over 1,200 tanks. Rommel's pleas to be allowed to shorten the front fell on deaf ears. Both Hitler and Kesselring insisted instead that the Allies be kept on the back foot by limited attacks.

INTERCEPTION

On 6 March, the German 90th and 164th Light Infantry Divisions and the 10th, 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions attacked units from the Eighth Army at Medenine. Striking at 6am, their goal was to delay the expected attack on the Mareth Line, the French fortifications built to prevent an invasion of Tunisia from Libya. But not for the first time during the North Africa Campaign, and nor for the last, Axis communications had been intercepted

and decoded by Ultra, giving advance warning of the attack. Taking strong defensive positions, the Eighth Army's artillery and anti-tank guns pounded Rommel's panzers. By dusk, the attack had failed at a cost of over 50 tanks.

Rommel, who had not played a part in the battle, began to despair. "We had been unable to interfere with Montgomery's preparations. A great gloom settled over us all. The Eighth Army's attack was now imminent and we had to face it. For the Army Group to remain in Africa was now plain suicide." But the Desert Fox himself was not to remain in Africa. On 10 March he met with Hitler at his Führerhauptquartier Werwolf headquarters in the Ukraine, and once again attempted to convince the Führer to withdraw from Tunisia. Hitler, in a downbeat mood after the loss of Stalingrad, declined. Rommel was placed on sick leave and not allowed to return to North Africa, his command being taken over by von Arnim.

MOVEMENTS SPOTTED

Montgomery's first attack on the Mareth Line ended in failure. On 16 March, Lieutenant-General Bernard Cyril Freyberg of the 2nd New Zealand Division led 27,000 men and 200 tanks to break the Italian infantry lines south of the Mamata Hills, while two divisions of the 30th Corps attacked in the north. Troop movements were spotted so the element of surprise was lost, and neither attack made headway.

Operation Pugilist was launched on 19 March, when XXX Corps of the British Eighth Army launched a new attack on the Mareth Line. The 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division managed to penetrate the line, but

terrain and the weather made tank support impossible. At 10:30pm on 20 March, a second attack began with the biggest Allied artillery barrage since El Alamein. Freyberg, on the left flank, was making steady progress by now, and Messe, as Montgomery had predicted, was initially unsure of which attack to prioritise. On 22 March, the 15th Panzer Division pushed back the armourless 50th Infantry Division, recapturing much of the bridgehead.

Gurkhas from the 4th Indian Infantry Division made themselves busy. As Major-General Sir Francis de Guingard of Military Intelligence recalls, "Their main task was to beat up any posts, destroy any large guns which were firing from that area and generally cause alarm and despondency. They appear to have had excellent sport. They got busy with their knives very quietly in the dark. I don't think the Germans quite liked it. I remember one particular Gurkha situation report which finished, 'Enemy losses ten killed, ours nil. Ammunition expenditure nil'."

With the attack on the Mareth Line repulsed, Montgomery deployed X Corps' 1st Armoured Division, which had been kept in reserve ready to exploit a breakthrough. He used it to reinforce Freyberg's attack, which was beginning to lose momentum. Codenamed Operation Supercharge II, Freyberg's replenished and revitalised forces successfully captured the Tebaga Gap and El Hamma. As Rommel had feared during his January inspection, the fortifications had been outflanked, and the Axis positions there had become untenable. Unable to hold the Mareth Line, they withdrew to Gabès and laid down a new line of defense.

"There was no desperate effort at evacuation. For the most part, not even dignified surrender"

Poised: Members of an American gun crew sit inside a camouflaged emplacement as they await orders in the El Guettar Valley, Tunisia, 1943



GENERAL REFUSAL

The Axis forces were now in retreat. The US II Corps met the German 10th Panzer Division at the Battle of El Guettar, on 23 March 1943. The American front line was soon overrun, threatening the US 1st Infantry Division's headquarters. Their commander, Major General Terry de la Mesa Allen, Sr, refused to withdraw. "I will like hell pull out, and I'll shoot the first bastard who does," he's quoted as saying. But despite initial successes against the American lead units, the German panzers soon ran into an American minefield, where they were pinned down by anti-tank guns. After losing 30 tanks, they were forced to retreat back to Gabès.

On 6 April 1943, the right flank of the First Army met with units from the Eighth Army. The two great Allied forces, Montgomery and the divisions that pressed west from Egypt after El Alamein, and Eisenhower's troops moving east after the Torch Landings, had united, joining forces for the final push that would throw the German and Italian armies out of Africa for good.

Wadi Akarit was taken next. Its defenders, Italian marines, put up a brave but ultimately futile resistance. The British Eighth Army and the U.S. II Corps pressed forwards, eventually breaking the enemy lines. The Axis positions at Gabès were far less formidable than expected, the troops less well dug in and their defensive positions not as well prepared. The Eighth Army breached the line, and the Axis divisions soon forced back once again, abandoning the new line and fleeing to the north.

EMERGENCY MEASURES

In the northern sector, supplies and ammunition were getting low. On 29 March, Colonel-General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim sent a message to the German high command. "Supplies disastrous. Ammunition for 1-2 days, nothing left in the depot for artillery. Petrol similar, major movements no longer permitted. No ships for several days. Supplies and provisions only for one week." His troops were proving resourceful. Wine was distilled into petrol, mines were built from old wooden boxes and spades were made from wrecked ships' hulls. But emergency measures such as these could not suffice. The Axis forces were gradually being pushed back on both sides of Tunisia.

By now even Kesselring realised the Axis position was hopeless, and sought a partial evacuation. But Hitler was adamant his forces should fight to the last round. Admiral Karl Dönitz, Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, implored the Italian navy to deliver

more supplies to Tunisia, but his pleas went unanswered.

The remaining Axis forces held their last positions doggedly, fighting for every hill and valley. But they were now hanging on by a thread, defending only the hills around Tunis and Bizerte, both on the northern coast of Tunisia. The loss of key airfields in the central region of the country gave the Allies air superiority once again. A new bombing campaign was launched against Axis' supply ships and the ports in what remained of their Tunisian territory.

In April 1943, less than half the required minimum tonnage of supplies reached the beleaguered German and Italian forces, while the Allies had built up a formidable reserve of troops and materials. With victory within grasp, experienced units were withdrawn from the front and replaced with fresh troops, allowing them to gain battle experience in favourable conditions.

UNDER SIEGE

The Axis defences in this area were well dug in, but they were under great pressure. First, their positions were bombarded by Allied artillery and bombed from the air, then the infantry overran what was left of their shattered lines. By early May, the cracks were showing. The Allies launched Operation Vulcan, the final land attack on the German and Italian forces in Tunisia. Gaps created in the enemy lines were ruthlessly exploited, and the enemy was pushed back even further. On 6 May, a fierce British attack south-west of Tunis virtually destroyed the veteran German 15th Panzer division, clearing the way for a push into the Tunisian capital. Tunis and Bizerte fell on 7 May.

Even though the Axis' position was now impossible, the fighting continued, with hundreds of German and Italian lives needlessly sacrificed due to Hitler's orders to fight to the last man and the last round. The remnants of the Afrika Korps held out in the hills south of Tunis until 13 May, before being forced to surrender. But surrender they did.

Declining to lay down their lives for a lost cause, almost a quarter of a million Axis troops were taken prisoner, including Commander-in-Chief of Army Group Africa Colonel-General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim, and the Italian commander, General Giovanni Messe.

The battle for Tunisia had finally been won. As the Allied propaganda film *Axis Smashed in Africa* put it, "There was no desperate effort at evacuation. For the most part, not even dignified surrender. It is collapse, total and unmitigated. The disintegration of an army of more than 200,000 men."



Aiming at Italy: Members of Allied high command, including Winston Churchill and Dwight D Eisenhower, discuss plans for Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily



AFTER THE VICTORY

The battle was won, but not the war.
For the key players in the North African Campaign, the story was far from over...

After victory in North Africa, the Allied forces in Tunisia crossed the Mediterranean, landing in Sicily on 10 July 1943. Mussolini was deposed on 25 July and the new Italian Government requested an armistice on 3 August. On 8 September, five days after the Allied invasion of the Italian mainland began, the Italian surrender was confirmed. But the fighting didn't stop. The German armies in Italy fought on. Kesselring convinced Hitler that the defence of Italy should be conducted as far away from Germany as possible, forcing the Allies to fight for every mile of territory as they progressed up the Italian 'boot'.

Churchill's statement that Italy was the "soft underbelly of the axis" proved spectacularly wide of the mark. As General Mark Clark later put it, it was in fact "one tough gut". A mountain range running almost the full length of the country made combined operations very difficult, and the Italian landscape proved perfectly suited for defence, especially as a series of fortified lines running across the country had been set up. Breaking

these lines, especially the Gustav Line at Monte Cassino, took some of the hardest fighting of the whole war.

Lieutenant-General (later Field Marshal) Sir Bernard Montgomery commanded the Eighth Army through the Italian campaign, and the British and Canadian 21st Army Group during the invasion of Normandy. In September 1944, he persuaded the Allied Supreme Commander General Eisenhower to adopt his strategy of a targeted thrust through occupied Holland and into Germany, striking at the Ruhr Valley, Germany's industrial heartland. It was a bold plan, but a futile one – Operation Market Garden failed to capture strategically vital bridges, and the thrust fell short of the German border.

After the war, Montgomery became Commander in Chief of the British Army of the Rhine (the British forces occupying the defeated Germany), and was made 1st Viscount Montgomery of Alamein in 1946. He died in 1976 in Islington, Hampshire, aged 88.

GENERAL IKE

General Dwight D 'Ike' Eisenhower was named Supreme Allied Commander

in Europe in December 1943. He commanded the Allied invasion of France in June 1944 – Operation Overlord – and successfully resisted and repelled the surprise German counterattack in December of that year, in the Battle of the Bulge. On discovering German concentration camps, he ordered film crews to record the atrocities to use as evidence in the Nuremberg Trials.

In 1950, Eisenhower was made Supreme Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a position he held until 1953. Although he had previously resisted attempts to get him into politics, he stood as the Republican candidate in the 1952 election. His campaign slogan, 'I Like Ike', proved simple but effective – he won by a landslide, and became the last American president to have been born in the 19th century. He served two terms, leaving office in 1961.



"Rommel deserves our respect ... although loyal, he came to hate Hitler"

Winston Churchill



Eisenhower died of heart failure in Washington, D.C., in 1969, aged 78. His former Vice President, Richard Nixon, paid tribute: "Some men are considered great because they lead great armies or they lead powerful nations," he said. "For eight years now, Dwight Eisenhower has neither commanded an army nor led a nation; and yet he remained through his final days the world's most admired and respected man, truly the first citizen of the world."

ROMMEL'S FATE

Fate was less kind to Erwin Rommel. After leaving North Africa, he was moved to Greece to prevent a British invasion as commander of Army Group E. The invasion never came, so in August 1943 he was moved to Italy to command Army Group B, and then to Normandy where he oversaw the fortification of the Atlantic Wall.

By now Rommel was disillusioned with the Nazi Government and disgusted by its atrocities. He opposed the assassination of Hitler, preferring to see him arrested and tried for his crimes, but in 1944 he became implicated in the 20 July plot, in which Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg and fellow conspirators tried to kill the Führer by planting a bomb in a conference room. Rommel was arrested, but to avoid the loss of morale the trial of such a popular general might generate, he was given the option of committing suicide, after which he would be granted a state funeral and his family would be able to draw his full pension.

Rommel swallowed a cyanide pill on 14 October 1944, aged 52. The following day, German radio announced, "Field Marshal General Rommel died as a result of the severe head injuries he sustained in an automobile accident while commander of an army group in the West. The

Führer has ordered a state funeral." He also declared a day of mourning, and in an incredible act of cynicism, sent a message of sympathy to Rommel's wife. "In your deep bereavement," stated the telegraph, "which you have suffered through the death of your husband, accept my sincere condolences. The name of Field Marshal Rommel will always be associated with the heroic battles in North Africa."

Germany had lost one of its most talented officers, but also a thoroughly decent human being. Even Churchill paid tribute. As he wrote in 1949, "Rommel deserves our respect, because although a loyal German soldier, he came to hate Hitler and all his works, and took part in the conspiracy to rescue Germany by displacing the maniac and tyrant. For this he paid the forfeit of his life. In the sombre wars of modern democracy, there is little place for chivalry."

VICTORY IN THE DESERT

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VICTORY IN THE DESERT



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ROUTING ROMMEL

Find out how the Allies turned the tide to finally defeat the famed Desert Fox



U.S. INTERVENTION

Inside the Allied operation that plunged the U.S. into a new arena of the war